

(Re)mapping the Borderlands of Blackness:  
Afro-Mexican Consciousness and the Politics of Culture

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Philosophy in the Department of  
Romance Studies in the Graduate School  
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ABSTRACT

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## **ABSTRACT**

The dominant cartography of post-Revolutionary Mexico has relied upon strategic constructions of a unified and homogenized national and cultural consciousness (*mexicanidad*), in order to invent and map a coherent image of imagined community. These strategic boundaries of *mexicanidad* have also relied upon the mapping of specific codes of being and belonging onto the Mexican geo-body. I argue that these codes have been intimately linked to the discourse of *mestizaje*, which, in its articulation and operation, has been fashioned as a cosmic tool with which to dissolve and solve the ethno-racial and social divisions following the Revolution, and to usher a unified *mestizo* nation onto a trajectory towards modernity.

However, despite its rhetoric of salvation and seemingly color-blind, race-less, and positivistic articulation, the discourse of *mestizaje* has propagated an uneven configuration of *mexicanidad* in which the belonging of certain elements have been coded as inferior, primitive, problematic, and invisible. More precisely, in the case of Mexicans of African descent, this segment of the population has also been silenced

and dis-placed from this dominant cartography of national being and belonging.

This dissertation examines the coding of blackness and its relationship with *mexicanidad* in specific sites and spaces of knowledge production and cultural production in the contemporary era. I first present an analysis of this production in the period immediately following the Revolution, especially from the 1920's to the 1960's, a period labeled as the "cultural phase of the Mexican Revolution."<sup>1</sup> This time period was strategic in manufacturing and disseminating a precise politics of culture that was used to reflect this dominant configuration and cartography of *mexicanidad*. That is, the knowledge and culture produced during this time imbedded and displayed codes of being and belonging, which resonated State projects and narratives that were used to define and secure the boundaries of a unified, *mestizo* imaginary of *mexicanidad*. And, it is within this context that I suggest that blackness has been framed as invisible, problematic, and foreign.

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<sup>1</sup> In his text *African Mexicans and the Discourse on Modern Nation*, Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas coins this phrase to describe this strategic and prolific period of cultural production.

For example, cultural texts such as film and comics have served as sites that have facilitated the production and reflection of this uneasy relationship between blackness and *mexicanidad*. Moreover, this strained and estranged relationship has been further sustained by the nationalization and institutionalization of knowledge and culture related to the black presence and history in Mexico. From the foundational text *La raza cósmica*, written in 1925 by José Vasconcelos, to highly influential corpuses produced by Mexican anthropologists during this post-Revolutionary period, the production of knowledge and the production of culture have been intimately tied together within an uneven structure of power that has formalized racialized frames of reference and operated on a logic of coloniality. As a result, today it is common to be met with the notion that “*no hay negros en México* (there are no blacks in Mexico).

Yet, on the contrary, contemporary Afro-Mexican artists and community organizations within the Costa Chica region have been engaging a different cultural politics that has been serving as a tool of place-making and as a decolonization of codes of being and belonging. In this regard, I present an analysis of contemporary Afro-Mexican

cultural production, specifically visual arts and radio, that present a counter-cartography of the relationship between blackness and *mexicanidad*. More specifically, in their engagement of the discourse of *cimarronaje* (maroonage), I propose that these sites of cultural production also challenge, re-think, re-imagine, and re-configure this relationship. I also suggest that this is an alternative discourse of *cimarronaje* that functions as a decolonial project in terms of the reification and re-articulation of *afromexicanidad* (Afro-Mexican-ness) as a dynamic and pluri-versal construction of being and belonging. And, thus, in their link to community programs and social action initiatives, this contemporary cultural production also strives to combat the historical silence, dis-placement, and discrimination of the Afro-Mexican presence in and contributions to the nation. In turn, this dissertation offers an intervention in the making of and the relationships between race, space and place, and presents an interrogation of the geo-politics and bio-politics of being and belonging in contemporary Mexico.

## **Dedication**

Para Yovi y Eitan.

May you always cherish all the skins that you are in.



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## **INTRODUCTION**

*Who are we? Are we a 'we', one people or several? If we are a 'we', what distinguishes us from the 'thems' who are not us?*

-Samuel Huntington

*El hecho de que nuestro mapa sea básicamente de mestizos nos permite pensar que así sería también el de otras poblaciones latinoamericanas, pues tenemos un origen similar: indígenas, españoles y un poquito de africanos. En ese sentido, el mapa mexicano tiene un impacto regional*

-Gerardo Jiménez-Sánchez,  
Instituto Nacional Mexicano de Medicina Genética

In May of 2009, the National Institute of Genomic Medicine in Mexico (INMEGEN) presented the official genomic map of Mexico to a crowd of enthusiastic scientists, medical professionals, and others including then president, Felipe Calderón. This national platform dedicated to genomic medicine is based on an extensive study of genomewide data elicited from Mexican *mestizos* and Indigenous populations in various regions of the country. The primary goal of the INMEGEN-run Mexican Genome Diversity Project (MGDP) is to improve the healthcare of Mexicans via the identification and analysis of genes

related to common and complex diseases in the Mexican population, including diabetes, cancer, and cardiovascular diseases (Silva-Zolezzi, et.al 8611). Moreover, the ability of the project to isolate and link genetic variations found in common diseases within the Mexican population, has been lauded as highly beneficial in providing more individualized and targeted healthcare to a population that is unique in its ethno-racial make-up. In fact, it is precisely because of its complex history of “admixture,” that Mexico has been framed as an ideal location in which to develop a genomic map that is country specific. (8611) Dr. Gerardo Jiménez-Sánchez, the general director of INMEGEN, declared:

*Los genes de la población mexicana son el resultado de la mezcla de 35 grupos étnicos y por tanto, distintos a los de Europa, Asia y África* (The genes of the Mexican population are a result of the mixture of 35 ethnic groups and thus distinct from those in Europe, Asia, and African. (Alcántara)<sup>1</sup>

He further adds that due to the unique genetic make-up of the Mexican population:

*los fármacos que se crean en Europa y se prueban en Europa no podremos aplicarlos en toda la población mexicana* (the medicines that are created in Europe and that are tested in

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise specified, translations are my own.

Europe cannot be applied to the entire Mexican population.  
(Alcántara)

These statements highlight that, according to Institute's director, the genomic map of Mexico does not only present an opportunity to affirm common genetic markers within a diverse population, but also to distinguish a Mexican genetic footprint that demands unique, pharmacogenomic medicines, different from those needed by populations in Europe, Asia, and Africa.

This notion of personalized medicine that piggy-backs onto a catalog of human genetic diversity is a well-intentioned application of the results of the Mexican Genome Diversity Project; however, it has been met with concern and criticism. First, the use of the genetic databases by private and commercial sources has come under attack by bioethicists and social scientists, who have questioned the role of and benefits to influential transnational corporations that have exclusive interests in the genetic data that has been collected, especially samples elicited from indigenous populations. These critics are concerned that numerous native populations are not aware of nor have they given their full consent to the extended use of their genetic

samples and data by transnational pharmaceutical corporations, which could then develop and patent expensive products that would be economically out of reach for a large sector of the Mexican population (Ribeiro 1). Critics frame this commercialization of genetic data as a form of biocolonialism or biopiracy, in which individuals and communities become in a sense (patented) property of the private industry, without the ability to exert power over their own, biological domain. Moreover, this concern about the privatization and commercialization of the genetic data has been enhanced by the extensive relationships between INMAGEN, the private Fundación Mexicana para la Salud (Funsalud) and its partners, such as Bayer and GlaxoSmithKline, who will have preferential access to the databases (Ribeiro 1). For these transnational pharmaceutical companies:

*las variaciones genéticas de los pueblos indios serían una valiosa base para desarrollar fármacos de éxito comercial* (the genetic variations of the Indian communities would be a valuable base from which to develop medicines that would be a commercial success). (Ribeiro 1)

This statement illuminates the possibility of the biological material of native populations being converted into pharmacogenomic commercial successes for the use of government and private industry. And, in a climate of rampant commercial greed and capital accumulation, it is

not known if and how these economic and medicinal successes would be directed back to these same Indigenous groups, whose own economic purchasing power is generally highly limited, if possible at all. This possible dichotomy resulting from uneven power in the use and commercialization of genetic material again demands further inquiries and reflections about the repercussions facing the different parties and agents involved in the creation of this genomic map of Mexico. Would this project and the resultant pharmacogenomic advances bring royalties or medical benefits to Indigenous groups, or in the end, would it just “enable their further objectification and exploitation” (Reardon 6)?

Another concern about the Mexican Genome Diversity Project that speaks directly to this dissertation relates to questions of identity, identification, and belonging. More specifically, it is the relationship between these broad terms and, in this case, the development of a genetic cartography that is being employed to delineate “who we are as a species and how we came to be” (Human Genome Diversity Project 1). Since the initiation of the Human Genome Diversity Project (HGDP) in the early 1990’s, the fields of genetics and genomics have

become attractive, contemporary frameworks with which to analyze human diversity and answer these age-old questions of lineage and origin. In the case of Mexico, we see how these fields are being utilized to distinguish “who we are” as a nation in order to provide targeted medical care.<sup>2</sup> Yet, what demands critical scrutiny in this act of mapping in Mexico, I argue, is the use of science to attempt to define national boundaries along ethno-racial lines and identity categories (an echo of Nazi science) that are relevant to strategic narratives of national belonging. For example, the opening citation by INMEGEN’s director, Dr. Gerardo Jimenez-Sanchez, highlights the “Spanish, Amerindian, and *slight* African” lineages that make-up the Mexican and Latin American landscapes. In singling out these three “genetic” lines, Jimenez-Sanchez echoes the foundational narrative of belonging in the region, a narrative that has been used to erect explicit and symbolic borders that have constructed and ordered specific identity formations throughout the history of Mexico. That is, this INMEGEN genetic map is predicated on a narrative that has long been utilized to code identity

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<sup>2</sup> This is a useful case in which to examine Foucault’s understanding of *biopower*, where science and scientific knowledge attains power over life—how to improve it, prolong it, end it, etc.

and belonging in the region for centuries. The narrative is *mestizaje*, the cosmic mixing of Spanish, Amerindian, and African lineages that was the result of conquest and colonialism. And, in this case, I suggest that, in an attempt to reveal the nation's genetic make-up, the INMEGEN map merely traces the lines that *mestizaje* has already put in place as a dominant means of delineating the social, cultural, political and biological borders of belonging in Mexico. For example, the INMGEM map has been constructed exclusively along the ethno-racial lines that are defined in *mestizaje*: White/European and Amerindian. Genetic samples were only elicited from Mestizos and Zapotecos, who could confirm that their parents and grandparents had originated in the specific locality in which the samples were taken (Valadez Rodriguez).

Constructing a genomic map of Mexico based exclusively on samples taken from Mestizos and an Amerindian group reinforces socially constructed "types" that make up the nation, while simultaneously excluding other "types" in this genetic make-up of Mexico. For instance, are there no other ethno-racial "types," lineages, or heritages besides those of the Spanish and Amerindian that have



been a part of the fabric of identity post-conquest, colonialism, and Independence? Does the genetic footprint of other immigrant groups in Mexico, such as Asians and Middle Eastern groups, not merit an articulated space within this genetic cartography? How does this genomic map consider Mexican migrants who reside beyond the country's borders, or who are citizens of other nation-states and self-identify with other heritages as well? Can we really map a nation along genetic lines?

Furthermore, what has happened to the "*slight*" African component in this genetic cartography of Mexico? Why were individuals and communities who identify as Afro-Mexican not included in this study? Jimenez-Sanchez's statement acknowledges the African root in the region. He even goes as far as to comment on the extent to which African lineage contributed to region: "*poquito*."<sup>3</sup> Yet the genetic samples excluded those who self-identify or who are identified as Afro-

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<sup>3</sup> Jimenez-Sanchez's comment on the "*poquito*" or *slight* African origin in the history of the region echoes the taxonomic role of the *casta* system in which differing amounts of bloodlines were documented in an effort to order and manage the biological combinations of different types that arose through colonial contact in the *New World*.

descendent. This exclusion within the Mexican Genomic Map reaffirms another element in the narrative of *mestizaje*: the disappearance of the African and black components within the *mestizo* nation. That is, in the dominant narrative of *mestizaje*, Amerindian and white/European biological and cultural markers and contributions remain; however, those associated with black lineage have been framed as completely disappeared and absorbed into brown, and integrated through the process of *mestizaje*, more particularly through the process of whitening. This genetic absence and disappearance of blackness is explained by Mexico's most lauded researcher of the black presence in Mexico, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán. In his celebrated study of the black population in Mexico, he conveys:

*es del consenso general que los esclavos que contribuyeron a dar color a la carga genética de México quedaron integrados en el mestizaje de modo tan completo que resulta difícil, para el lego, distinguir los rasgos negroides en el conjunto de la población actual. Lo anterior implica aceptar que la integración negra es un hecho consumado en el tiempo histórico* (it is the general consensus that the slaves that contributed color to the genetic makeup of Mexico remained integrated so completely through *mestizaje* that it proves difficult, for the layman, to distinguish the Negroid traits within the current nation as a whole. The aforementioned implicates the acceptance that the Black integration is a fact that has been carried-out along the length of history. (277)

The construction of the Genomic Map of Mexico follows this trajectory of blackness in *mestizaje* as an “integrated” and disappeared element, thus leading the scientists who drew this map to ignore and exclude this component from the genetic landscape of the Mexican population.

Discussing the Genomic Map of Mexico and noting who has been left out and left in this genetic cartography is very useful in understanding how dominant narratives of identity, identification, and belonging continue to operate within the nation. In addition, we are able to see the power with which the dominant narrative of *mestizaje* endures and frames other projects and forms of analyzing and coding belonging within the State. For example, in this case, we see how *mestizaje* governs knowledge production, here in terms of science and the fields of genomics and genetics. It still has enormous power in constructing and maintaining biological, cultural, social, economic, and political borders. Moreover, in asking who and how the boundaries of this *mestizo* nation are defined, we can further critically inquire about what it means to construct a genetic map of Mexico along the lines of *mestizaje*, and we can ask what are the implications for those who are

genetically invisible within the boundaries of *mestizaje* and thus located outside this cartography of Mexico?

I have used this particular example of the Mexican genomic map in order to highlight these types of questions that point to the very core of the power of dominant, national narratives of being and belonging that continue to dominate the construction of imagined community in Mexico. Furthermore, it is a case that also demonstrates how these dominant narratives also speak to the power of different tools or frameworks of mapping, which continue to locate (or dislocate), classify and order peoples, knowledge, and cultures who are included and excluded within a particular domain. In the case of the Mexican Genome Diversity Project, it is a cartographic framework that uses genomics to construct and map the genetic boundaries of a Mexican imagined community. In addition, this genomic map only includes certain identity categories, those of *mestizo* and Amerindian origin, thus affirming the dominant national narrative that links *mestizaje* with *mexicanidad*<sup>4</sup> or Mexican-ness<sup>5</sup>. In turn, in the case of

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<sup>4</sup> I define *mexicanidad* as Mexican national and cultural consciousness.

the MGD, searching for a “Mexican gene” is predicated on and also cements the essentialist notion that Mexico is a *mestizo* nation.

This dissertation does not further examine the role of science and genomics in configuring imagined community and defining codes of belonging in Mexico. However, this particular example does provide a useful, introductory remark about different, contemporary cartographic apparatuses that have been and are being used as forms of mapping being and belonging in Mexico. Furthermore, it also highlights how cartographic tools sustain or break from the national narrative of *mestizaje* as the dominant marker of belonging in Mexico (in the case of the MGD, this narrative is supported by the search for a dominant gene). Finally, it is also a useful example with which to

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<sup>5</sup>In an interview with *El Economista*, INMAGEN’s director, Dr. Gerardo Jimenez-Sanchez, reiterates this national narrative regarding *mestizaje*, stating that “*el 85% de la población mexicana es ahora compuesto por mestizos, esto es la población que tiene dos componentes mayores: caucásico y amerindio* (85% of the Mexican population is now composed of *mestizos*, that is, the population has two main components: Caucasian and Amerindian).” (<http://eleconomista.com.mx/tecnociencia/2009/05/11/revelan-mapa-genomico-mexicanos>)

introduce several questions that do fall within the scope of this dissertation: how is blackness and African and black identity placed or displaced within the contemporary cartography of Mexico, and thus what are the relationships between blackness and Mexican-ness?<sup>6</sup>

The use of cartography to locate or dislocate peoples, ideas, and cultures within hemispheric, regional, national, and local domains has been a part of human history for centuries. From the medieval T-O map to contemporary genomic maps, cartography has been an extraordinarily powerful tool in the “processes of place making and people making” (Gupta and Ferguson 4). That is, in our desire to spatialize human existence, mapping has been instrumental in defining and shaping who we are and how we relate to and with one another. It is an instrument of governance and surveillance, permitting and

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<sup>6</sup> If we analyze direct references made towards the African component of mestizaje and its space within Mexico’s genomic map, we see that it is consistently referenced as the third, genetic line that is *slightly* present in the genomic map, and only as a result of conquest and colonialism. Direct references made to contemporary persons or communities of African descent do not appear as such. No identity categories, such as Afro-Mexican, which formally recognize these populations, are included in the project and in the samples collected. The genomic map only frames them as *mestizos*.

restricting the movements of peoples, knowledges, and cultures. It is also an apparatus that employs innovative designs in thinking about and challenging the formation of communities, networks, and contact zones. In turn, cartography is a powerful tool with which to communicate and (re)define who we are and “what distinguishes us from the ‘thems’ who are not us” (Huntington 9).

If we envision mapping as a technology that is used to establish alternative modes of thinking and representation, as well as of alternative locations of being and belonging, I suggest that we also engage the concept of counter-cartography. This concept imagines and constructs different forms of “other” cartographies or activist cartographies that have served as instruments with which to challenge borders that have defined and limited who we are and who we are not. Whether utilized by social movements or marginalized groups as a mechanism with which to reclaim place, recognition, and participation, or whether it is envisioned as a decolonial transformation forging new “spiritual geographies” and alliances, counter-cartography is also able to function as a tool in re-locating or dislocating peoples, ideas, and

cultures.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, mapping as an action of counter-cartography follows the theoretical comments by Deleuze and Guattari, that “the map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification” (12). It does not serve as a tool of fixation, cementing boundaries of identity, knowledge, place, and space. Instead, it employs fluid, malleable and alternative configurations of the location and spatialization of being and belonging.

This dissertation incorporates this split or dual framework of cartography and counter-cartography in order to analyze the broader relationships between identity, space, and place in contemporary Mexico. More specifically, I engage this framework to focus on the relationships between blackness and *mexicanidad* or Mexican-ness. This dual framework of mapping is useful in understanding the uneasy relationships between blackness and *mexicanidad* precisely because it

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<sup>7</sup> Following the anti-communist revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe during the early 1990's, Jacques Derrida envisioned counter-cartographies of Europe, or decolonial transformations or reshaping of the borders of Europe. He called for the possibility of new “spiritual geographies” that would result in a Europe heading in new directions accompanied by changing goals and alliances.



demonstrates how cultural, political, economic, and social borders have been and are being configured and re-configured between these two entities. For example, in specific historical time periods, blackness has been displaced or rendered place-less in its relation to *mexicanidad*. At other moments, the borders of this relationship are being deconstructed as certain geographic and cultural spaces reclaim and reconfigure notions of place in the relationship between blackness and *mexicanidad*.

I suggest that it is crucial to engage particular time frames in order to gain a deeper understanding and conduct a critical analysis of the relationships between blackness, *afromexicanidad*, and *mexicanidad*. Hence, the organization of this manuscript presents a conversation between two specific time periods: the first two chapters examine these relationships in the period from the 1920's to the 1960's, while the last two chapters engage a time frame from the 1990's through the current decade. I argue that these two periods are strategic in the making and re-making of the cartographies and counter-cartographies of blackness, *afromexicanidad*, and *mexicanidad*. Moreover, establishing a dialogue between these moments allows us to better map and theorize the intersections and

borders, and the placement and dis-placement of these loaded terms: how are they constructed, imagined, imaged, performed, reified, and articulated? Why? By whom, and in response to or within what social, political, cultural, and economic contexts?

Each of the chapters in this dissertation incorporates my own disciplinary frames of literary and cultural studies to engage these questions. The first chapter presents a critical analysis of the nationalization and institutionalization of knowledge produced about the relationships between blackness and *mexicanidad* during the post-Revolutionary period. I propose that this is a strategic moment in *forjando patria*, in inventing and disseminating a particular, bounded map of *lo mexicano* (the Mexican way), and in empowering national (and nationalizing) narratives that have attempted to reflect a sense of cultural and ethno-racial stability in order to match the need for political and social stability immediately following the Revolution. I illustrate how these goals are articulated in the Vasconcelian discourse of *mestizaje*, and how they have been extended into Mexican anthropological spheres and spaces that, I propose, have contributed to the foundation of an uneasy and uneven relationship between blackness and *mexicanidad*. I argue that these sites of knowledge

production have produced and supported a relationship in which blackness has been silenced and made invisible and absent. That is, blackness has been dis-placed elsewhere in this pivotal moment of the construction of the modern, *mestizo* nation. Moreover, this chapter also outlines how these narratives, sites, and projects embody the logic of coloniality/modernity as a means with which to erect, sustain, and monitor the bio-political and geo-political borders of *mexicanidad*.

The second chapter extends this analysis to the area of Mexican popular culture, in order to further explore these notions of displacement and placeless-ness in the relationship between blackness and *mexicanidad*. Mexican popular culture and cultural production in general are similar in function to maps, as they also often create and attempt to make visible the walls, bridges, and borders of identity, space, and place. In this chapter I present an examination of specific sites of popular culture and suggest that they serve as cartographic tools with which to organize and represent dominant, national narratives of being and belonging in contemporary Mexico. More precisely, I demonstrate how the comic series *Memín Pinguín* and the films *Angelitos negros* and *Al son del mambo* all reflect concerns with

sustaining a strategic cultural cartography in which blackness does not fit neatly within or is out-right dis-located beyond the borders of *mexicanidad*. These three sites of popular cultural production are all produced from the 1920's to the 1960's, a period labeled as the "Golden Age" of Mexican culture or as the "Cultural phase of the Mexican Revolution" (Hernández Cuevas). I argue that this period is again a strategic moment in the configuration of the national-cultural in Mexico. That is, it is a moment in which the images of the nation are strategically linked to or embedded within culture. During this time period, popular culture aimed to visualize and make visible a national imaginary of social and ethno-racial unity and coherence after a Revolution that had fragmented Mexican society.

The third and fourth chapters of this dissertation offer a counter-cartography of these uneven and uneasy relationships between blackness and *mexicanidad*. That is, while the first and second chapters detail a cartography in which blackness is placed elsewhere or occupies a problematic space within the dominant, national construction of *mexicanidad*, chapters three and four explore specific cultural and socio-political projects that reconfigure and challenge the

configurations, borders, and boundaries of these relationships. I propose that they are projects that are directed against the State and against the dominant and hegemonic, national narratives that have dis-located *afromexicanidad* and problematized the relationship between blackness and *mexicanidad*, as illustrated in the first two chapters. As such, chapters three and four present a counter-cartography in which strategies of localization and place-based consciousness envision blackness as internal to and placed within the borders of *mexicanidad*. Furthermore, I argue that these strategies of localization and counter-cartography also demonstrate projects and processes of decolonization in which Afro-Mexicans, similar to other “members of exploited or oppressed groups dare to critically interrogate [their] locations, identities, and allegiances that inform how [they] live [their] lives” (hooks 295). In the third chapter, I focus on contemporary cultural production in Afro-Mexican communities in the Costa Chica region of Oaxaca and Guerrero. While the extensive communities of African descent in this area have been marooned from political, economic, and cultural inclusion within Mexico, local artists and community organizations are serving as their own cartographers in mapping their identity, their identifications, and their space and

place within the region and the nation. More importantly, I demonstrate how they are engaging the discourse of *cimarronaje cultural* (cultural maroonage) as a counter-cartography of blackness, a decolonization of being and belonging, and as a tool of critical consciousness in the configuration and representation of blackness and Afro-Mexican identity, one that is based on an interplay of social conditions, alternative historical memory, and local cultural traditions.

Finally, the fourth chapter extends this counter-cartography of blackness in discussing specific socio-political projects that further aim to decolonize and re-map the being and belonging of Afro-Mexicans in regional and national spaces. From projects which aim to gain political recognition, namely in the census, to local initiatives introduced by local civic organizations such as *México Negro* that have facilitated socio-economic improvement and increased spaces and modes of inclusion in the region, I demonstrate how Afro-Mexican communities have been active in forging new relationships and other cartographies in an effort to “transform existing spaces and prefigure alternative ones” (Cobarrubias iii). In turn, I propose that these decolonial and

counter-cartographies are critical in re-mapping the borderlands of blackness, especially in its relation to *mexicanidad*.

As such, "(Re)mapping the Borderlands of Blackness" not only contributes to conversations, debates, and interrogations of the complex, malleable, and fluid relationships between race, space, and place in contemporary Mexico, but also, I suggest, expands the constructions, articulations, and cartographies of *afrolatinidad* and *latinidad* as well.

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Mapping Blackness Elsewhere: Mestizaje, Anthropology, and the Coloniality of Knowledge**

*Es del consenso general que los esclavos que contribuyeron a dar color a la carga genética de México quedaron integrados en el mestizaje de modo tan completo que resulta difícil, para el lego, distinguir los rasgos negroides en el conjunto de la población actual. Lo anterior implica aceptar que la integración negra es un hecho consumado en el tiempo histórico.*

-Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán

In 1992, the Mexican Constitution was amended in order to recognize that:

*la nación mexicana tiene una composición pluricultural sustentada originalmente en sus pueblos indígenas* (the Mexican nation has a pluricultural composition originally constituted by its Indigenous peoples).<sup>1</sup>

Drafted in the same year of the quincentennial anniversary of the arrival of Columbus in the Americas, this addition provided an authoritative, official space in which to reflect upon the diverse demographic composition of the nation, and to formally recognize the

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<sup>1</sup> Diario Oficial de la Federación. "Decreto que adiciona el artículo 4 de la Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos", México, January 28, 1992.



rich cultural history of its ethnic populations. Numerous individuals and groups within Mexico lauded this long, overdue, juridical articulation of recognition as a significant political gesture that could address the vast economic, political, and social disparities that Mexico's marginalized populations have endured throughout the 500 years of contact, conquest, Independence, Revolution, and democratization. Upon the release of Article 4 in the Constitution, several national, state, and local programs and policies were initiated in order to facilitate the greater integration of these communities by improving their access to political, social, and economic infrastructure, especially in more rural and isolated areas of the country, where a large percentage of Mexico's distinct ethnic groups reside. These projects linked to the debate of Article 4 were, however, only directed towards officially recognized Indigenous groups, who, despite their emblematic status of serving as the primogenital roots of the nation's cultural heritage, have continued to live in destitute conditions as over 60% suffer from extreme poverty (Hopenhagen). Critics have questioned the real ability of this constitutional amendment at dismantling uneven power structures and related processes of racialization that have continued to produce these conditions and disparities (we only have to look at the

resurgence of the neo-zapatista movement that arose only two years later).

Furthermore, in limiting its scope to Indigenous populations, I argue that Article 4 falls short in achieving a more comprehensive and complete recognition of all marginalized groups, especially those of African descent. In fact, the articulation of any kind of formal, official, national recognition or reference to Afro-descendent populations is strikingly absent and silent. Many have attributed this void to the lack of uniform criteria in identifying individuals of African descent. Unlike Indigenous groups who possess measurable identifiers such as distinctive language and dress, persons of African descent do not fall into any identifiable category. Thus, I propose that this constitutional article which attempts to construct a juridical map of Mexico's diverse population is highly similar to the construction of Mexico's genomic map (as described in the general introduction), as both present an official recognition of indigeneity, yet, simultaneously, harbor a silence of and towards blackness. As a result of such frameworks and the lack of isolatable and measurable identity markers, Afro-descendent populations are instead located within the frame of "*culturas*

*populares*" (popular cultures),<sup>2</sup> and thus remain on the margins of any official, statistical, constitutional (and genomic) recognition.<sup>3</sup>

Yet, invisibility and silence are not the only frames in which Mexicans of African descent are placed. In fact, references to Afro-descendants and images of blackness seem to appear in the most common of locations: from popular children's songs such as "Negrito sandia" sung by the iconic Mexican composer and performer Francisco Gabilondo Soler, famously known as *Cri-Cri*; sayings such as "*hay que trabajar como negro para vivir como blanco* (one must work like a black in order to live like a white);" to the highly consumed, twinkie-like pastry, *Negrito*. This chocolate filled and chocolate covered *pan*

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<sup>2</sup> When interviewing Alejandro González Villarruel, the Deputy Director of Ethnography at the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City, the response to my inquiry about why Afro-Mexicans were not included in the museum as a distinctive group while Indigenous populations are included as such, was that, since Mexicans of African descent do not possess a distinct language nor mode or dress (that is, they do not "possess" a Boasian understanding of culture), they are instead grouped within the classification of "*culturas populares* (popular cultures)."

<sup>3</sup> Researchers such as Ben Vinson and Bobby Vaughn estimate the number to be around 450 thousand, while others such as Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas, suggest that it is as much as a third of the total population.

*dulce* (sweet bread), which is produced by the global food conglomerate, Grupo Bimbo, is found in most convenience stores throughout the country. A light-skinned adolescent with a large, black afro dons the cover of the pastry, inviting the consumer to “*vivir un momento cool con tus amigos* (live a cool moment with your friends). This updated image is highly altered from the original packaging that debuted on store shelves in 1957. Then consumers were met with the display of a dark-skinned *negrito*, wearing a straw skirt and with a bone through his hair, while smiling and holding a spear.

These examples illuminate the varied representations of blacks and blackness in Mexico that permeate everyday life. In addition, I also argue that these images and expressions do not codify blacks and blackness as uniquely and essentially Mexican. Instead, they reflect global, transnational circulations of representations of blackness, whether in the form of stereotypes (the African as primitive—the tribal image of the first *Negrito* packaging; or the African as a slave—the common euphemistic expression that relates to how hard blacks work) or politicized aesthetics (the Afro hair of the current *Negrito* packaging

which links to African American political and social movements in the United States).

Furthermore, I propose that, when set against the spaces of invisibility and silence, these everyday appearances, representations, and performances of blacks and blackness are indicative of the “uneasy tension” in the relationship between *mexicanidad*<sup>4</sup> or Mexican-ness and blackness (Vaughn 49). That is, these dichotomous frameworks offer different maps with which to place and dis-place the articulation and representation of blackness in the geo-political and bio-political borders of Mexico. Is blackness an integral part of the Mexican social landscape? Are blacks present and placed in Mexico? Or, are blacks and blackness always conceived of as dis-placed, foreign, or as foreigners (a tribal character from Africa or an African American from the U.S. with afro hair)? I submit that, in examining this contradictory and uneasy relationship, we are able to reference Agustín Lao-Montes’ theorization of Afro-Latin identity or *afrolatinidad* in general, as a conceptually hyphenated phrase (like Afro-Mexican)

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<sup>4</sup> I define *mexicanidad* as Mexican national and cultural consciousness.

that “signifies two complex and contested fields of identification” (76). Namely, it is with common conviction that the recognition and inclusion of Afro-descendency in *latinidad* or Latin-ness, is molded by a precarious and slippery relationship in which an uneven, dominant power structure often denies, silences, or hyper-visibilitys and stereotypes its connection with blacks and blackness. I propose that this is a fitting characterization of the predicament of blackness in contemporary Mexico. It is a predicament of identity and identification that can be located in a hyphenated space, in a complex and contested field of identification, and within the borderlands of invisibility and hypervisibility, of absence and common-place presence, and of silence and everyday language. Moreover, in order to understand this predicament of blackness in the borderlands, I suggest that it is necessary to critically examine a specific time period in the trajectory of the (re)production of strategic narratives that frame this relationship between blackness and *mexicanidad* (Mexican-ness).

This chapter examines forms and sites of knowledge production and dissemination in a period immediately following the Mexican Revolution, particularly from the 1920’s to the 1960’s. It is a historical

moment in which the (re)invention and (re)mapping of imagined community was critical to attempt to conjoin the social and political fragments that had splintered apart during Revolution. Moreover, it is a moment in which the State was explicitly involved in and linked to the (re)production of knowledge that would help to re-form the nation as a “coherent and discrete entity via projects [and narratives that were] rationalized by a self-represented history as state memory” (Goldberg 8). That is, it is within this period that the coloniality of knowledge “appropriates [the] meaning” and representation of being and belonging in Mexican history and memory in order to guide the post-Revolutionary nation on a coherent path towards modernity (Mignolo 152). And, finally, it is within this time period that the knowledge (re)produced and disseminated about the relationships between blackness and *mexicanidad* also served to foment notions of national coherence and modernization.

### **1.1 *Mestizaje and the Mapping of Blackness Beyond the Borders of Modern Mexicanidad***

The often contradictory and uneasy relationship between blackness and *mexicanidad* that I previously described is not new in its conception. Long before national independence and the manufacturing of *mexicanidad*, the relationship between blackness and other constructions of identity in the Americas was also marked with uneasy tensions. For example, in an attempt to catalogue the different “types” that resulted from conquest, contact, and miscegenation, *casta* paintings from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries illustrated how blackness had permeated the biological and cultural landscape of the Americas. These illustrations ranged from pure-blooded *negros*, and mixed Spanish and black *mulatos*, to mixed Indigenous and black *lobos*, and mixed Spanish and Indigenous *mestizos*. These *casta* paintings served as a visual taxonomy that attempted to understand, order, and manage the “ambiguities” that resulted from conquest and contact (Wade 358). The Spanish functionaries that commissioned these paintings were highly concerned with the resulting social, economic,



and cultural relationships between these types in order to enforce and preserve the socio-racial boundaries that were critical for the colonial system of power. And, these functionaries were concerned with how the taint of black blood would color and affect these boundaries. Within these depictions and the knowledge produced at the time, blackness was viewed as a "*salta pa'tras*," a step backwards in the colonial design of civilization, and threat to the purity of the Spanish (and Indian) populations in the "New World." As a result, the mixture of blackness with other "types" was closely monitored, and yet, at the same time, it could not entirely be excluded, excised, or erased as the black body (slavery) was crucial for the operation of colonial society. As represented in these colonial-era illustrations, blackness circulated the borderlands of colonial society, appearing and disappearing throughout the social landscape of the Americas.

If we jump forward several centuries to another time period of social, political, economic, cultural, and racial anxieties, we again see how these colonial "types" needed to be managed and organized in order to fit the strategic needs and goals of the moment. This moment was at the conclusion of the Mexican Revolution, when the

fragmentation of the nation needed to be welded together again, this time, for the purpose of modernization. That is, in order to acquire or gain access to modernity, the nation needed to unify and again “manage its heterogeneity” (Goldberg 31).

Enter the discourse of *mestizaje*, the biological and cultural mixing between essential types. More specifically, it is the particular narrative of *mestizaje* outlined in the foundational text, *La raza cósmica*, by the Mexican writer, philosopher, and politician José Vasconcelos (1882-1959). Published in 1925, this signature work of Mexico’s first secretary of public education and rector of the National Autonomous University of Mexico attempted to illuminate the path towards progress, modernity, and global integration via the unique ethno-racial history and memory of Latin America.

The text outlines the ethno-spiritual journey of Latin America, a journey that distinguishes this history of the region and employs it as the gateway towards progress and modernity, what the author labels as *el porvenir* (the future). Vasconcelos’ thesis claims that the

propensity towards racial mixing in Latin America will allow for the achievement of an “ethnic mission:” the configuration and culmination of a fifth race, *una raza cósmica* (a cosmic race), *una raza síntesis* (a racial synthesis), that was based upon a fusion of all races, and then would result in the forging of a “universal type” and the “future of Humanity” as a whole.

Vasconcelos first establishes the creation of this fusion via the delineation of a “mission” or contribution of each racial type (the Black, the Red, the Yellow, and the White), followed by the disappearance of each type after the completion of their respective missions, and then the creation of a fifth racial type represented by the cosmic race or the *mestizo*. Vasconcelos illuminates the different types and their respective contributions:

*El hombre rojo:*                      *que supo tanto de los bosques y aguas verdes*  
(The Red man: who knew so much about the forests and green waters)

*El hombre negro:*                      *ávido de dicha sensual, ebrio de danzas y desenfrenadas lujurias*  
(The Black man: thirsty for sensual happiness, passionate with dances and unbridled lusts)

*El mongol:*                    *el misterio de su ojo oblicuo, que toda cosa la mira conforme a un ángulo extraño*  
 (The Mongol/Yellow man: the mystery of his oblique eye, which looks at everything with a strange angle)

*El hombre blanco:*        *su mente clara*  
 (The White man: his lucid mind)    (19)

Vasconcelos claims that after the progression and the fall of these four types, "no race returns" in History, for it is all about "transformation and novelty." And it is the "destiny" of the American continent to serve as a "cradle for the fifth race in which all peoples will unite, thus replacing the previous four races, which, until now, have forged History in isolation" (15). Moreover, in order to further promote the cosmic race, he distinguishes it as one that is capable of assimilation and thus progress, unlike the other races. For example, he delineates the white man (whom he most often links to England and the United States since he is writing at a moment of the rise of the U.S. empire) as a racial type that committed the "sin of destroying the other races," especially their own native peoples (here he is referencing the annihilation of the North American Indian in the United States). In contrast, the cosmic race is one that has an advantage on the road to progress and *el porvenir* for it already "possesses greater

facility of sympathy towards strangers” due to the mixture of which it is composed. Thus, the cosmic race, represented by the *mestizo* nation, is the symbol and mechanism for an “ethnic mission” that will not only bring the Latin American nations closer to unity and modernity, but will also even save humanity through this creation of a universal type.

Again, as in myriad discourses employed to conceptualize and rationalize a project of modernity, we note the rhetoric of salvation, which is now embodied within the discourse of *mestizaje*: fusion, synthesis, a cosmic ethnic mission. Via this vocabulary Vasconcelos clearly looks past the rape of Latin America and its various inhabitants in order to appropriate the history of mixture and assign it universal ethnic and spiritual value. In fact, he even represents the Spanish soldiers who “united” with Indigenous families as missionaries. Clearly this romanticization of conquest strategically ignores the violent past and present of Latin America, where the discourse of cosmic blending and cohesion has not exactly created the ideal citizen, the *mestizo*, without violence and domination.

On the contrary, in its attempts to erase primordial categories of race and ethnicity, I argue that *mestizaje* continually reconstructs them. That is, the *mestizo* can only exist in relation to racial absolutes or essentialized *types*, which Vasconcelos clearly delineates in this text. Moreover, this racial fusion is not of even synthesis and power. The author of this text is sure to imbue the white race with greater significance and value in the creation of the cosmic race. For example, in addition to his "lucid mind," Vasconcelos consistently glorifies the great triumphs of the white man: his ability to conquer nature and transform the world via mechanization (the combustible), industrialization, and science. He "accepts the superior ideals of the white man" and recognizes that the "characteristics of the white [race] predominate the characteristics of the fifth race" (23). Thus, despite its trajectory towards ethno-racial pluralism and conceptual racelessness, whiteness or whitening (*blanqueamiento*) continues to be the ultimate objective of this cosmic mission and remains as the "silent desired standards, the teleological norms of civilized social life" (Goldberg 206). In essence, the Vasconcelian narrative of *mestizaje* continues the hierarchy and operation of racial formations.

It is within this narrative that we also continue to find a racialized framing of and relationship with blackness. Vasconcelos rarely references blacks in the text. And when outlining their role in the cosmic mission, as illustrated above, he characterizes the black type as “*ávido de dicha sensual, ebrio de danzas y desenfrenadas lujurias* (thirsty for sensual happiness, passionate with dances and unbridled lusts)” (Vasconcelos 19). I suggest that this description essentializes blackness and marks the black body as a sign and signifier of hypersexuality. In fact, as proposed by Galadriel Mehera Gerardo, in “associating blackness with the undesirable characteristics that would gradually be weeded out through what he called ‘aesthetic eugenics,’” Vasconcelian thinking was in line with the scientific racism of the eugenics movement that was circulating through Europe and the United States at that time (178). Moreover, this racist and racializing discourse is further augmented as Vasconcelos does not envision any other contributions of the black race in modernity beyond the markings of sensuality, happiness, and rhythmic abilities. According to this author, in the culmination of the process of *mestizaje*, the black race will be “uplifted” and modernized through whitening, and will thus be absorbed and fade into brown,

with only traces of these essentialized elements circulating through the landscape of a modern Mexico. Thus, *mestizaje* could save and solve the black “problem” and result in the disappearance through absorption of this darker “racial trunk.”

### **1.2 *Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán: The Production of Knowledge and the Anthropological (Dis)placement of Blackness in Post-Revolutionary Mexico***

The Vasconcelian manifesto garnered great significance in the post-Revolutionary period. It was a fitting narrative of (ethno-racial) unification that could be extended to calls for national, social and political cohesion after the turmoil and fragmentation of Revolution. In fact, in framing itself as a *mestizo* nation, Mexico would be able to position itself well as a unique, integrated, and stronger nation that could become a beckon to others who, despite having already entered modernity, continued to deal with their own challenges of fragmentation (such as the United States, which was dealing with its own “race problem” and remained as a segregated society, in contrast to Mexico’s integration).



Thus, in an effort to get-to-know (I would suggest adding the terms monitor and manage as well, a similar function of the *casta* paintings as detailed above) the different elements within the *mestizo* nation, especially the *other*, more inferior types, academic fields have become a highly useful space in which to (re)discover Mexico's others, modernize them, and in turn, guide and integrate them into the *porvenir*. In particular, the field of anthropology became a strategic tool in investigating, producing, and disseminating knowledge about Mexico's diverse populations. This field primarily set its gaze upon the nation's Indigenous populations. (Re)discovering this isolated and alienated fragment of the nation would allow for the researcher, as an extension of the State, to be more informed about the native, who, in being framed as Mexico's cultural relic and progenitor of the nation's common cultural heritage and memory, needed to be rescued from its "pre-modern waiting room" (Chakrabarty). In addition, since most Indians were often defined as not being truly Mexican, "since these races still conserve their own nationality, protected by family and language" (Ramírez 221-222), anthropology, through ethnography and the *indigenismo* movement, would be charged with the rescue of this

disconnected soul and thus incorporate them into the larger, modern, national map.

Manuel Gamio (1883-1960), the father of modern Mexican anthropology, would be a pivotal figure in the political and nationalizing role of anthropology in rescuing and re-discovering Mexico's Indigenous populations. This influential anthropologist, who studied under Franz Boas at Columbia University, and became the founding director of the Escuela Internacional de Antropología y Etnografía Americana (1916-1920) and the Instituto Indigenista Interamericano (1942-1960), was instrumental in re-instating "Indian civilization as the foundation of Mexican history" (Brading 78). Gamio followed the "Boasian concept of culture, defining it as the 'natural and intellectual manifestations' of any human group" (Brading 79). And as a result of this definition of culture, he always referenced the Indigenous "civilization," and was dedicated to discovering, displaying, and celebrating the remnants of the grand civilizations that were once a part of the Mexican landscape. For example, in addition to Gamio's dedication to reviving the Mexican artisan industry, he was also the lead figure in leading the excavation of the Valley of Teotihuacán and

converting it into one of Mexico's most popular and revered tourist sites.

Moreover, it was Gamio's insistence on the importance of the relationship between anthropology and the State that lended power and financial support to these projects and goals. As outlined in his controversial text *Forjando patria*, Gamio envisioned the role of anthropology as:

*el conocimiento básico para el desempeño del buen gobierno, ya que por medio de ella se conoce a la población que es la materia prima con que se gobierna y para quien se gobierna* (the basic knowledge for the achievement of good government, since through it one is familiar with the population that is the raw material with which to govern and for whom one is governed).  
(15)

That is, through this vision that politicizes and nationalizes the field of anthropology in its ability to "became familiar with" and get-to-know the national population, especially its Indigenous populations, the government could in turn educate, civilize, and better integrate these lesser-known, foreign, isolated, and alienated components of the Mexican landscape. As such, in line with Gamio's perspectives regarding the important link between State ethnography and the ethnography of the State, it would benefit and strengthen both

anthropology and government in discovering, excavating, and getting-to-know lost civilizations that were “imbedded in practices, places, and languages considered to be at the margins of the nation-state” (Das and Poole 3). And moreover, this linked relationship between the State and the knowledge produced by fields such as anthropology, would help to precipitate the integration of its marginal, lesser-known masses, namely the Amerindian, and thus cement the cosmic cohesion of the *mestizo* nation.

It was Gamio’s successor and student, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán (1908-1996), who would extend this vision of investigative rescue and national integration, yet in relation to Afro-descendent populations in Mexico. After studying under Gamio and completing work in anthropology under Melville Herskovits at Northwestern University, Beltrán achieved successes similar to his predecessor: he was also the director of the Instituto Indigenista Interamericano and was the deputy director of the Instituto Nacional Indigenista. Like Gamio who worked in these State-run institutes, Beltrán also supported the necessary link between the State and the field of anthropology. He conducted research on Indigenous populations, but is most celebrated

for his contributions to the ethnographic *discovery* of Mexico's Afro-descendent populations.

In his canonical text *La población negra en México; estudio etnohistórico*, which was published in 1946, Beltrán presents an exhaustive investigative history of blacks in the region and outlines topics that range from the quantity of blacks imported as slaves, their places of origin, to subsequent demographic information after importation. In the prologue of this text, he outlines the need to study these populations due to the:

*aporte genético y cultural del negro al patrimonio biológico y social de la nación* (the genetic and cultural contribution of blacks to the biological and social heritage of the nation). (7)

Moreover, he continues with a further justification of conducting this research. He acknowledges that, as a consequence of the dominant discourse of *mestizaje* which discounts the valuable contributions of blacks in the modern nation, yet highlights and engages the cultural and spiritual influences of the Indian within a positivistic frame, even the field of anthropology itself has been silent and lacking interest towards the African roots and Afro-descendent elements in the nation:

*hacen exclusiva referencia a la mezcla de la población blanca dominante con la americana vencida. Nadie se cuida de considerar la parte que toca a los negros en la integración de una cultura en México* (they make exclusive references to the mixture of the dominant white population with the defeated American [aka Amerindian] one. No one cares to consider the part that relates to the blacks within the integration of a Mexican culture). (9)

Moreover, even after the publication of this seminal text, he laments this lack of interest and recognition of the black elements in Mexico's cultural and social landscape:

*[El libro] no estimuló entre los estudiosos mexicanos el deseo de proseguir esta interesante línea de investigación; por tanto, continuamos, como en el pasado, sin tomar en cuenta el aporte del negro a la composición de la población, a la economía y a la cultura nacionales* [The book] did not stimulate the desire of Mexican intellectuals to follow this interesting line of investigation; thus, we continue, as in the past, not to acknowledge the black contribution to the composition of the national population, economy, and culture). (11)

Betrán's statements reveal a concern for the integration of blackness in the fields of knowledge production (namely anthropology) and in knowledge production that recognizes the historical contributions of blacks to the general social and cultural landscape of Mexico. Yet, on a contradictory note, despite this unease with blackness remaining in the margins of national culture and of research, he offers no opening for blackness in the present and future Mexico. That is, Beltrán falls into

the trap of the dominant narrative of *mestizaje*, which holds no space and place for blackness as its own, self-defined, and recognized identity and form of identification in the modern nation. Instead, as delineated in the previous section of this chapter, the destiny of blackness is integration through absorption (whitening), and thus only marked as a vestige of the past. In fact, Beltrán only conceives of and writes about the contributions of blacks in relation to Mexico's the past. His research and the subjects of his texts are heavily dedicated to the black presence in the colonial era. Even in his book *Cuijla*, which was published in 1958 and presents an ethnography of "afromestizo" populations in the area surrounding Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero, Beltrán notes:

*En la actualidad no existen en el país grupos verdaderamente negros...aun los grupos que hoy pudieran ser considerados como negros, aquellos que, en virtud de su aislamiento y conservatismo, lograron retener características somáticas predominantemente negroides y rasgos culturales africanos, no son, en realidad, sino mestizos, productos de una mezcla biológica y resultantes de la dinámica de la aculturación* (In the present, groups that are truly black do not exist in the country...even groups that today could be considered as black, those that, by virtue of their isolation and conservatism, successfully retained predominantly negroid somatic characteristics and African cultural traits, are not, in reality, but rather they are *mestizos*, products of a biological mixture and result of the dynamics of acculturation. (7-8)

That is, although some isolated groups may retain some somatic and cultural traits and traces of blackness, they are not *truly* black. Rather, they are just *mestizos*. These statements demonstrate how Beltrán conceives of the process and project of *mestizaje* as already having been achieved and completed. And, as a result, the presence of blacks and the place of blackness in the present and the future of Mexico are denied and absent. As he adds in the third and final edition of *La población negra de México*, the text serves to:

*cerrar el panorama total del transcurrir del negro desde sus lejanos orígenes en el África hasta su completa integración en el Estado mexicano* (close the entire panorama of the passage of the negro from his distant origins in Africa to his complete integration in the Mexican State). (12)

Thus, similar to the fate of the Amerindian, blacks and blackness are framed as distant and anachronic entities, dis-placed in time and place. And, while both could be *discovered*, rescued, and celebrated as cultural relics, the traces of Afro-descendency would be less visible or invisible in the modern *mestizo* nation due to their already-absorbed status.



### **1.3 *Recuerdos del Jarocho*<sup>5</sup>: The Museumification<sup>6</sup> of Blackness**

Understanding how the powerful discourse of *mestizaje* influenced the field of anthropology and silenced and dis-placed blackness to the past, is useful in critically analyzing other sites and spaces of knowledge production and dissemination. More specifically, if we examine the representation and construction of blackness in the space of the museum, we gain a further comprehension of just how pervasive this discourse has been.

First, it is extraordinarily useful to engage Mary Louis Pratt's theorization of the museum as:

the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict. (6-7)

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<sup>5</sup> Memories of the *jarocho*

<sup>6</sup> I borrow the term "museumification" from James Clifford, who employs it to reference any cultural performance or display of identity as an objectified tradition and site of subaltern exploitation. Moreover, as he suggests, this is a concept tied to the Western invention of the museum, a space that is a "relentless collector and commodifier of culture" (9).

Here we are able to envision the function of the museum as a space in which knowledges are performed, exchanged, and transferred. In this sense, it is important to recognize that the museum itself represents a location in which peoples who are “geographically and historically separated” have the opportunity to be in contact with each other because it lends to the relevance of knowledges that have been formulated *prior* to and *during* the contact experience. That is, *previous* knowledge about peoples, cultures, and places already marks or frames our understanding of the subjects and objects with which we later come into contact during the museum experience.

Second, it is further critical to assess what knowledge is produced and how it is transferred *during* the museum experience. If we conceive of museums as places where “different cultural visions and community interests are negotiated,” we are forced to engage the intersection of power structures with the idea of knowledge production (Clifford 8). That is, the museum is not a neutral space, void of questions, structures, and relations of power. On the contrary, I argue that the museum, as a site of institutionalized knowledge, is an

(Western) invention itself, a spatial invention that attempts to represent a unified perspective of culture and identity. However, it is often the perspective of the dominant or majority culture that is communicated and performed. In this respect, another section of Mary Louise Pratt's understanding of the museum as a contact zone becomes useful, in the fact that this type of encounter truly can be described as "colonial" and accompanied with conditions of "radical inequality." I propose that this notion leads us to question not only what peoples and objects are represented, but also how they are represented and who is assigning, constructing, and disseminating such representations.

It is within this framework of the museum as a contact zone of uneven power relations that we can further examine the displacement of blackness in Mexico. I have selected to apply this framework to the *Museo de la Ciudad* in the port city of Veracruz. Inaugurated as an official museum in 1970, this is a self-described:

*Institución cultural sin fines de lucro, que recibe, restaura, conserva, [y] exhibe objetos y colecciones con mérito e interés histórico, artístico y cultural, relacionados con la ciudad de Veracruz.* Non-profit cultural institution, that receives, restores, preserves [and] exhibits objects and collections of historical,

artistic and cultural merit and interest related to the city of Veracruz.<sup>7</sup>

The permanent exhibitions of the museum follow a chronological layout that presents the “history of the city.” This sequence begins in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with:

*vestigios prehispánicos encontrados en la Isla de Sacrificios, al igual que en los alrededores de la ciudad* (pre-Hispanic vestiges found in the Island of Sacrifices and in the surroundings of the city).<sup>8</sup>

These vestiges include Olmec heads and *códices totonacas* (Totonac codexes), which describe the entrance of the Spaniards in the newly established city of the Vera-cruz. According to the museum literature, these objects are considered part of cultural recovery or “*rescate*” and allow for an admiration of the pictographic work and sculptures created by native peoples.

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted information describing the museum, its content and functions, is acquired from literature and pamphlets that have been published by the sector of the *Coordinación de Cultura* of the *Ayuntamiento de Veracruz*. This information is cited in the bibliography as “*Museo de la Ciudad*.”

<sup>8</sup> *Museo de la Ciudad. 35 Aniversario*. (Veracruz: H. Ayuntamiento de Veracruz, 2005).

Other exhibition spaces include artifacts and written descriptions related to the development of the city during the Viceroyalty, the foreign interventions and the Reformation (from the 16<sup>th</sup> century through the 19<sup>th</sup> century). A final exhibition hall registers the history of the city in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, specifically until 1950, noting the important harbor works and development related to the fishing industry, urban enlargement, and social movements (especially those linked with the arrival of Spanish exiles). From these central nodes of exhibition, what constitutes objects and collections of “interest” are those primarily related to European interventions and narratives of economic and socio-political development and progress in the city and region. This one-sided, uneven “interest” is to be expected, as the time period covered in these representations are concerned with the “Ciudad” and, thus, traces the establishment and expansion of the *City* from an important viceregal port to a modern, metropolitan zone of maritime importance.

With these frames of reference in mind, we are now able to examine more specifically the museum’s representation of blackness and of Africans and Afro-descendants in relation to the historical,

artistic, and cultural development of the City of Veracruz. It is important to first note the historical background of the black presence in Veracruz. As of the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, Mexico harbored the second largest population of enslaved Africans and the greatest number of free blacks in the Americas (Bennett 1). In being the most important port of richest possession in the Spanish colonial empire, Veracruz was the central port of entrance of African slaves into the territory (Carroll 3). With the large decline in the indigenous populations due to disease, the presence of African slaves was crucial in the economic development of this specific area where the cultivation of sugar cane, tobacco, and coffee were principle resources. In addition to their economic contributions, Afro-Veracruzanos were characterized as the “most socially outgoing of any racial groups” whose socio-cultural contributions were heavier than would be expected given their slave status (Carroll xi).

Recalling this brief historical, background information of the city, what concerns us now is how blackness has been mapped in this museum space. That is, how and what of this early and contemporary black, African and *afroveracruzano* experience has been translated,

codified, and communicated in this institution. The exhibits related to these particular questions include a small-scale replica of port activity in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This model includes male figures of African descent, most of which are shirtless, participating together in laborious tasks at the port, while light-skinned figures, fully-clothed and sitting on horses, oversee the work being completed. This is described as a typical, every-day scene at the port. No further details about the figures are given. From the types of activities and the modes of dress that correspond to these respective figures, the social status and division of labor that were linked to racial demarcation is clearly illuminated.

A second portion of the exhibit that directly addresses blackness, and African and Afro-descendent presence and/or contributions is related specifically to the term "*jarocho*". This term is of unique importance to the history and culture of Veracruz, as the contemporary use of this term often refers to the general inhabitants of the port City and the State itself (those of mixed descent). The city of Veracruz itself is also called "*el puerto jarocho*." In fact the use of this term is so commonplace that it often refers to anything associated

with the region of Veracruz, such as *jarocho* coffee. The museum provides a written explanation that details the origin of this term, as well as its changing usage. Likened to the “*guajiro*” of Cuba or the “*jíbaro*” of Puerto Rico, this was originally a derogatory term of Arabo-Andaluz origin and was used to refer to persons of mixed Indigenous and African descent. The original, meaning of the term “*jarocho*” is “*puerco del monte*” (mountain pig). Additional meanings include “*portador de la jara*” or “*garrocha*” (spear or arrow carrier) in reference to black cowboys in the coastal and plains regions who used these items to corral cattle. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the term was applied to *pardos* and *mulatos* (respectively, persons of mixed Indigenous and black, and white European and black descent) who were armed with lances and aided in defending the port during foreign invasions and in battles during the War of Independence. The term was again reconstituted in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when it ceased to be a derogatory word and was used to refer to all persons of mixed European, African, and Indigenous descent. Moreover, it primarily became associated with “*el carácter alegre y bullanguero*” (the happy and raucous character) of these persons. These notions associated



with the *veracruzano* character continue to be widely used today in the region and in Mexico as a whole.

In essence, the changing constitution and the changing nature of the term "*jarocho*" is important in examining the flexibility of racial nomenclature during these periods. Used as a disparaging term to reference persons of mixed Indigenous and African descent during the early 18<sup>th</sup> century is indicative of the meanings assigned by Spaniards to these inhabitants. That is, their social status and perhaps even human status can be linked to these particular uses of the term "*jarocho*." First, its use can be delineated as a means with which to distinguish between Europeans and persons of slave status. It is further significant to note that the word was later reconstituted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and then included persons of European descent. This specific time was the moment of Independence, when it was of crucial importance to resonate the inclusion of African, Indigenous and European legacies in defining the rightful or legitimate place for the diverse inhabitants of the soon-to-be independent nation. Hence the term *jarocho* became more "inclusive" as well. More specifically, I suggest that this "more inclusive" use of the term *jarocho* can be

linked to the reification of nomenclature by Creole elites who needed the inclusion of these *other* inhabitants in their successful quest for political and economic independence from Spain. Noting the changing use of this term in these two distinct moments allows us to see the importance and malleability of classificatory terms that were associated with the Spanish and *criollo* political projects of these respective periods.

These two exhibits, the physical replication of slave activity at the port and the written explanations of the origin and uses of the term "*jarocho*", provide a critical frame for thinking about how blackness has been made and mapped in this specific site. First, it is crucial to note that the knowledge about Black persons as communicated within this museum space references a being that has solely been assigned meaning by the European or the person of European descent (*Criollo*). That is, the person of African descent is not constitutive of itself, but is rather a subjectivity assigned or granted to him or her. Second, any detailed information relating to the black experience beyond slavery is not included in these exhibits, which are the only exhibits that directly engage the black experience in

relation to the history and culture of the city of Veracruz. No mention is made of black contributions in dance, music, clothing, and food, areas of great distinction in formulating knowledge about not only past, but also about contemporary culture in this city. In essence, the black experience, as formalized, represented, and disseminated in this institution, is essentialized as the slave experience. There is no information about the lifestyles and cultures of persons of African descent either before or after slavery. Their very existence seems only to fit into a particular temporal and spatial location, a location defined and assigned by the dominant (European/*criollo*) power. Blackness is of the past (slavery during the colonial era) and is dis-placed from the modern vision and conception of modern-day Veracruz. The fact that little to no information maps Afro-descendency or blackness in Veracruz beyond slavery, demonstrates that the representation of and knowledge about these identities and identifications are essentially mapped within the temporal and spatial frames of colonial slavery, and that anything else beyond these constructions is restricted, invisible, and perhaps even “unthinkable”.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Here I reference Michel Rolph-Trouillot’s characterization of the

The content and structure of these two museum exhibits have resonated with the dominant knowledge produced about blackness in post-Revolutionary Mexican anthropology and within the discourse of *mestizaje* as previously described. As such, I propose that this analysis of the *Museo de la Ciudad* in Veracruz, provides a very useful example of the power and extension of knowledge production that renders a temporal and spatial dis-placement of blackness (in Veracruz and Mexico as a whole).

#### **1.4 *The Coloniality of Knowledge and the Dis-placement of Blackness***

As I have demonstrated in the previous sections of this chapter, the knowledge produced and disseminated about the presence, identifications, and representations of blackness in Mexico has been

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Haitian Revolution, an “unthinkable” event within European consciousness.

framed as de-linked and dis-placed from the modern, *mestizo* nation. Whether essentialized as an inferior, primitive, and weaker type in the Vasconcelian conceptualization of *mestizaje*, or as an anachronic, cultural relic of Mexico's past as in the vision of Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán and the *Museo de la Ciudad* in Veracruz, these frames have been produced, engaged, and manipulated in a variety of sites that have produced knowledge about the state or status of blackness in modern Mexico.

In fact, I argue that it is this very knowledge produced and disseminated in these sites that needs to be critically attacked, as it has been successful in silencing blackness, so much so that it remains invisible in the constitutional and genomic maps of contemporary Mexico. I propose that it is a corpus of knowledge that has been constructed and communicated in a system of uneven power structures that are embedded in coloniality. A concept theorized by Anibal Quijano, coloniality refers to a specific "mode of knowing, of producing knowledge, of producing perspectives, images and systems of images, symbols, [and] modes of signification" (44). Furthermore, it is a classificatory apparatus that is formed by the intersection of

systems of knowledge and structures of power. And most important, I propose, it is also mediated by processes and projects of racialization and the operation of racism, or the “systematicity of social oppression” that is linked to racial difference (Memmi 93). This is a lot to unpack, but I suggest that we think about the coloniality of knowledge as ways of knowing, systems of images, and modes of representation that operate in uneven structures of power that are sustained by hierarchical configurations of racial difference. That is, in the sphere of coloniality, knowledge is mediated by the intersections of race/racism and power. And furthermore, in terms of the nationalized and institutionalized knowledge produced and disseminated by post-Revolutionary Mexican anthropology and its extension, the museum, we further see the coloniality of knowledge in what Trouillot and Gramsci would respectively describe as the “uneven power in the production of sources, archives, and narratives” in “civil” structures and processes such as museums, cultural institutions, and even the census or in constitutional amendments (Trouillot 27; Gramsci 243).

For example, if we apply this theorization to the Vasconcelian conceptualization of *mestizaje*, races are created, assigned, and appropriated by invisible agents that seem to remain uncolored and humanistic on the surface (Vasconcelos was just concerned with the future unification and modernization of Mexico). However, these racial and racialized types, that have been constructed by an invisible hand, fit within a logic that forges uneven relationships between peoples or between subjects and objects for the purpose of domination, exploitation, or subjugation (Quijano 44). As such, these racial and racialized types have been imbued with uneven social, cultural, and even human value. And, for those inferior types, their destiny will be markedly uneven as well. In the case of Vasconcelian *mestizaje*, the darker races (the black and Indian) are limited in their value and contributions, and, as a result, erased and absorbed by other types who have been invested with greater value (the white). In turn, even though the *mestizo* has been framed and portrayed as a raceless, cosmic fusion, it is a construct that is still founded by ways of knowing, seeing, and representing that privilege whiteness and whitening, and discount and silence blackness and darkening.

Finally, I suggest that it is the logic of coloniality/modernity that, in these cases and sites of knowledge production, serves to rationalize and justify constructions of being and belonging that also privilege whiteness and whitening, while making blackness and darkening inferior and invisible. That is, in the attempts of Vasconcelos, Gamio, and Beltrán to unify Mexico's diverse populations and rescue its pre-modern history and cultural memory on the pathway to modernity, they frame blackness with the veil of coloniality, what Walter Mignolo delineates as the "darker side of modernity." As such, the relationship between these sites of knowledge production and the logic of coloniality/modernity, I argue, is a primary cause for the silencing and absence of blackness in the construction and representation of the modern *mestizo* nation.



## CHAPTER TWO

### ***Forjando patria: Framing and Performing Blackness in the "Golden Age" of Mexican Culture***

*Stable cultures require things to stay in their appointed place.  
Symbolic boundaries keep the categories 'pure',  
giving cultures their unique meaning and identity.*

-Stuart Hall

Marked by social, economic, and political divisions, the social landscape of Mexico was left in a state of fragmentation following the Revolution. The fabric of the nation was splintered, disorganized, and marred by class stratification as a result of disparities in access to and accumulation of wealth and power. Thus, reflections on national unity and cohesion became integral in moving Mexico beyond Revolution and onto a path of prosperity and progress. How was post-Revolutionary Mexico to organize, imagine, and image itself as a

“coherent and discrete entity” in which shared narratives of being and belonging would aid in the re-invention of the modern state (Goldberg 8)? What spaces would allow for the creation and communication of strategic narratives that would sustain and bolster projects of nationalization and social reunification? After the lengthy period of civil and political unrest, the possibility of a reconciled and unified Mexican society demanded a unique trajectory that would reconstruct and re-invent a modern, imagined community that had been torn apart by Revolution.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the emphasis of a common cultural and ethno-racial history was framed as a strategic tool in tethering together the distinct fragments of Mexico’s citizenry and marking the boundaries of belonging in the post-Revolutionary period. In particular, coding itself as the *mestizo* nation, coupled with the nationalization, institutionalization, and museumification of this shared Mexican culture and history, aided in creating, framing, and empowering official narratives that would serve as foundational threads in weaving together a more cohesive social fabric. These narratives promoted a strategically drawn map of ethno-racial

citizenship through the process and project of *mestizaje*, in which supposedly all of the different ethno-racial fragments would coalesce into a cosmic mixture and lead the nation on a path of “transformation and novelty” (Vasconcelos 13). Now, following the Revolution, in an era of rampant industrialization and much-sought-after economic progress, Mexico would need another tool that would further echo and disseminate these official historical and cultural narratives of citizenship and belonging, and would also allow them to widely circulate across the social divisions that marred its landscape, and prepare the *mestizo* nation for a unified “*porvenir*” (future).

Enter the role of popular culture, a space that would become an extension of state and intellectual projects of unification and homogenization, and that would support an easily accessible map that would make visible and voice the debates, reflections, and tensions related to the construction of social and cultural citizenship in the modern Mexican *patria*. In a period ranging from the 1920’s to the 1960’s, an era described as the “cultural phase of the Mexican Revolution” by Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas, it was imperative that a sense of cultural stability matched and reflected the need for political

and social stability. That is, similar to Hernández Cuevas, I too suggest that popular culture during this time period would serve a strategic function in echoing the need for political and social cohesion following the Revolution. Moreover, as delineated in the opening citation by Stuart Hall, a “stable culture” was indispensable in fomenting and reflecting the “symbolic boundaries” of belonging that were required to unify and control the social and political spaces within the nation. In turn, as post-Revolutionary Mexico reflected upon and struggled with its political, economic, and social stability and destiny, the space of cultural production and consumption played a pivotal role in the construction of Mexican nationalism, in the creation of a culture with “unique meaning and identity,” and in the reflection of the nation as one, indivisible, and homogenous geo-body (Joseph, Rubenstein, and Zolov 9).

This period of the “cultural phase of the Mexican Revolution” was one of immense production in film, television, radio, visual and fine arts, and print media such as news magazines or *gacetillas* and comic book series or *historietas*. In fact, the production, dissemination, and consumption of items of popular culture were so prolific that this

period has also been labeled as the “Golden Age” of Mexican cultural production. For example, by 1947 the film industry was Mexico’s third largest contributor to the economic sector, with a 1956 year-end report on ticket sales indicating that the top three movies in Central America were all Mexican-made (Fein 103; Joseph, Rubenstein, and Zolov 4). Moreover, this period of cultural renaissance was also the height of muralism, in which the grand brush strokes of Diego Rivera, José Clemente Orozco and David Alfaro Siqueiros colored large public spaces with pictorial narratives that visualized historical topics, expressed social ideas, and forged a “community of [shared] national experience” (Rochfort 7).

It was precisely this narrative of shared national, historical, and cultural experience that made Mexico’s “Golden Age” so effective in imaging and imagining community and fortifying a sense of unity, pride, and nationalism among its citizens. In fact, it was the emergence of the notion of *lo mexicano* (the Mexican way) that became so foundational and significant in forging *patria* and unifying cultural and social identity. *Lo mexicano* aided in augmenting nationalism and unification because it served as a social, political,

cultural, and linguistic marker that coded and defined the essence of Mexican-ness--that which belongs and is inherently a part of being and acting Mexican. *Lo mexicano* is the Mexican way. As such, much of the content, topics, characters, and personalities represented and reflected upon in the cultural production of this time period were linked with ideas and representations of *lo mexicano*. This converted cultural production into a didactic tool that could instruct the Mexican populace about who belonged to the nation and how one was to behave as an accepted member of the re-invented, unified imagined community. And, with access to a broad audience across the country, popular culture became a very significant space in which to visualize, resonate, codify, brand, and disseminate *lo mexicano*.

For example, as more people entered the urban workforce during this time period of rapid industrialization and urbanization, the characters and content of "Golden Age" Mexican popular cultural production depicted how one was to behave in the workplace and in their new urban neighborhoods (Rubenstein 8). This is particularly evident in the increased representations of women in film and print media, where female characters and celebrities negotiated

“conservative standards for feminine decorum” as a means of performing or sometimes even challenging accepted forms of behavior (Rubenstein 5-6). As the number of women working inside and outside of the home increased, so too did the amount and variety of representations of female characters, and, in a related move, the family also became a focal point of reflection and representation in the cultural production of this time period. In fact, the family itself became an extraordinarily relevant and useful space in which to visualize and negotiate representations and articulations of *lo mexicano*. Myriad publications, films, songs, and works of art depicted and incorporated the family as a location or symbolic boundary in which citizens and the state reflected upon what constituted the Mexican way. The family provided a space in which ordinary Mexicans could envision and imagine their roles in their respective family units and also in the broader, unified “revolutionary family” that functioned as the core and future of Mexican culture and society (Joseph, Rubenstein, and Zolov 8). For example, in her analysis of Mexican comic books and *historietas*, Anne Rubenstein suggests that incorporating and representing the family in popular culture not only served as a strategy for attracting a larger audience through themes of familiarity

and sentimentality, but also in allowing readers to “understand themselves to be engaged in the fate of their families and their nation” (11, 19). As such, domestic iconography in popular culture facilitated the conversion of the private space of the family into a public space of reflection and expression in which the boundaries of identity within the larger national family were being produced, performed, and negotiated.<sup>10</sup>

This pedagogical and community-building role of cultural production became strategic in defining family, gender, and social roles within the post-Revolutionary state. Popular culture also served to code and to reflect acceptable behavior among the nation’s urban migrants, and members of the newly minted working and middle classes. In addition, it also echoed narratives of racial harmony and instructed Mexicans about how to view, manage, and live with the cosmic mixing of ethno-racial types that had been culturally and biologically coalesced together through the process and project of

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<sup>10</sup>We will return to a discussion of this role of the family in popular culture in the proceeding sections of this chapter, which analyze specific functions and representations of the family in the comic book series *Memín Pinguín* and the film *Angelitos negros*.



*mestizaje*. In fact, cultural production of this time period was highly instrumental and influential in imaging and imagining how the different ethno-racial lines would be framed, organized, and monitored within the post-Revolutionary, modern *mestizo* society. That is, after the decades of class struggles that were predicated on racial inequality and discrimination had erupted into Revolution, it was imperative to educate, pacify, and convince the national family that the “ethnic mission” of cosmic racial fusion would be crucial in transforming and modernizing the social, political, economic, and cultural landscape of Mexico. Cultural production of this time period needed to address and assuage these tensions towards the fifth race, and it needed to portray how foundational and integral *mestizaje* was to *lo mexicano* and to *mexicanidad*.

I suggest that the cultural production of this time period was critical in framing the links between *mestizaje* and *lo mexicano*. It helped the fragmented national family to literally and symbolically visualize how all the different bloodlines were to be integrated into the imagined community. And, this role was especially important in visualizing how Mexico’s darker bloodlines had been or were to be

incorporated within the post-Revolutionary, modern, *mestizo* nation. When I reference the darker bloodlines, I refer to the Amerindian and black identity constructs. For example, in an attempt to foster a sense of unity with its Amerindian bloodline, cultural production often highlighted and commodified select images, objects, and sites of Indigenous heritage. Investment in tourism to and enhanced publicity of historic landmarks such as Teotihuacan and Chichen Itza aided in echoing the discourse of *indigenismo*, which pushed the importance of the re-discovery of the nation's native past in order to better understand and fully incorporate this native, primitive link into the modern, *mestizo* family. This is illustrated in pictures in pamphlets published by the Asociación Mexicana de Turismo during the 1930's and 40's, which, similar to the iconography in *gacetillas*, commonly displayed a "folkloric optic of Mexico" in which the *india bonita* (pretty Amerindian woman), who was dressed in traditional attire, would flirtatiously gaze at the reader or viewer, inviting them to get to know Mexico's Indigenous past (Saragoza 106-108). The appearance and lure of the "friendly" yet modest and even muted *india* who beckons visitors from within Mexico and from "out-of-the-way" locations was a strategically crafted representation of Amerindian identity that was

consistently disseminated in print media and visual arts. For instance, one cannot forget the famous paintings of native figures by Diego Rivera that served to enhance the collective memory of Mexico's Amerindian past that, as the nation's cultural relics, could be integrated into the future through tourist discovery (a form of economic and social modernization).

While colorful and visually attractive or exotic, the incorporation of Indigenous themes and images into cultural production was a strategic tool and response to the State's political, social, economic, and cultural needs. It added to the growth of the tourism industry by promoting a vision of Mexico as a romanticized, sensualized, and folkloric setting (Higgenbotham 254), thus increasing revenue via the tourism sector. And it also crafted a unique space in which to imagine the cultural and social inclusion of the Amerindian into the Mexican *mestizo* landscape. In following the *Indigenismo* movement, which framed Amerindian culture as the lost but now re-discovered link to Mexico's past, cultural production carved a wide space in which to echo the goals of this movement and celebrate this re-discovered past. Furthermore, cultural production was also useful in highlighting the

sites and images which would help all Mexicans connect to a common cultural and historical heritage, thus precipitating greater cohesion within the borders of the Mexican imagined community after the social disjuncture of Revolution.

Along these lines, numerous intellectuals, artists, and politicians viewed this cultural rescue and revival of the Amerindian as a positive step on the road to modernization and national unification. Why not? The Amerindian would be civilized (again), and even better, modernized. As proposed by José Vasconcelos, the Amerindian “would jump the thousands of years that mediate between Atlantis and our epoch” (31). And modernizing the Amerindian would foster greater economic, political, social, and cultural inclusion of Mexico’s margins, thus piecing back together the fragments that had divided the nation along the lines of “class” (class being the benign term of choice when describing the social, political, economic, and cultural divisions of the Revolutionary period, despite the fact that they were mainly drawn along racial and ethnic lines).

It is important and useful to see how this “Golden Age” framework of the Amerindian differed from the representation of another marginal group, that of black and Afro-descendent ancestry. First, the portrayal of black and Afro-descendent culture was not framed as a pure construct that could be re-discovered and celebrated as the nation’s own, common moniker. Since the “black was ripped naked from his region of origin, [he] was unable to construct in New Spain the culture he belonged to” (Sepúlveda 101). According to this perspective, Afro-descendant populations did not possess their own culture as the Amerindians did. There were perhaps remnants or vestiges, most often related to music or magical beliefs. But, in accordance with the dominant narrative of *mestizaje*, what was authentically African had been cut off through slavery and erased through biological and cultural mixture. Black culture as such could not be rescued as the Amerindian culture could. Yet, if not as a cultural relic who could be re-discovered, modernized, and re-integrated into the nation, then how was the black bloodline to be framed in order to address the social tensions of the incorporation of Mexico’s even darker shades? How was blackness to be performed, imaged, and

imagined on the cultural stage? How was Mexico's third root to be treated and united within the larger national family?

To address these social anxieties towards blackness, I examine three specific examples of "Golden Age" cultural production. These examples present some different and some shared frameworks in which blacks and blackness are performed and represented, while also introducing various questions related to how post-Revolutionary Mexico could integrate blackness into its modern, *mestizo* mosaic. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the pedagogical or didactic nature of the cultural production of this time period, in addition to its mass appeal served as a perfect stage in which to address, debate, and perhaps assuage these tensions regarding the place and role of blacks and blackness in Mexico's *porvenir* (future).

## **2.1 Memín Pinguín: Dis-locating Blackness**

The first site of cultural production that I analyze is the highly popular comic strip series *Memín Pinguín*. The comic began publication and weekly circulation in 1947 in Mexico City, originally appearing in the newspaper *El Universal*. Over 372 chapters were created, which narrate the events in the daily lives of four friends in a public elementary school in Mexico: Memín Pinguín, the title character and central protagonist known for being funny, annoying, and saying inappropriate things or whatever comes to his mind; Ricardo, a wealthy boy who is often characterized as being sensitive and mature; Ernestillo, the son of a middle class carpenter, who is depicted as the prudent mediator of the group; and Carlangas, a lower-class boy who is portrayed as impulsive and rude. The series was a compilation of the narratives of Yolanda Vargas Dulché and the drawings of Sixto Valencia. Vargas Dulché, the daughter of a Mexican father and a French mother, created the title character after a trip to Cuba, during which she was fascinated with “*los niños negros*” (the black children) (Hernández Cuevas 52). She named the character after her then boyfriend, Guillermo de la Parra, using the name *Memín* in allusion to

his first name, and the last name *Pinguín* because her boyfriend was “*todo un ´pingo`, tan travieso*” (an absolute little devil, very naughty).

While initially circulating in Mexico, this comic series has been widely distributed to several countries including Columbia, Ecuador, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, and even the Philippines, where the Minister of Education designated the series as obligatory reading in public schools in order to “*enaltece[r] los valores humanos hacia la familia y el Estado* (extol human values toward the family and the State)” (Vargas Dulché). And most recently, it garnered further global presence when a series of postage stamps picturing Memín were circulated by the Mexican Postal Service (SEPOMEX) in 2005 as a celebration of the “History of Mexican Comics.” The release of the stamps was met with negativity in some countries, especially in the United States, due to the representation of Memín being deemed as offensive to many people and groups of African descent.

In noting the aesthetic and literary representations of the title character, we are able to understand the polemical nature of this comic. Visually, the central protagonist, Memín, is presented as a dark



pickaninny (monkey-like child) with exaggerated feet, lips, and eyes. He is usually clothed in over-sized tennis shoes, pants, a shirt, and a baseball cap. Noting this apparel is important, as it is highly distinctive from that of the other characters that appear in the series, whose clothing range from overalls to pants and a jacket, depending on their socio-economic status. In addition, the dark pigmentation of Memín is in stark contrast to the very light pigmentation of the other characters. In the initial descriptions of Memín, this distinction is verbalized by other students in his class, who comment upon the “*extraña figura*” (strange figure), “*chico de color*” (colored child), and “*re prieto*” (really dark). Thus, Memín is differentiated visually from the onset and his coloration and appearance are characterized as an anomaly in comparison with other children at the school.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to his physical appearance, Memín’s difference is also marked through language and religion. First, in terms of his linguistic dis-placement within his surroundings, quotations are often used to

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<sup>11</sup> Memín’s mother, Ma’ Linda is also distinctive from other female characters in the series. The larger-than-life, black woman is portrayed as an Aunt Jemima-type character with a head scarf.

highlight the contrast between Memín's vocabulary and that of his classmates. For example, within two different paragraphs, the words "espeitador" and "maistro" are placed in quotations. These terms would correspond to *espectador* (spectator) and *maestro* (teacher), respectively. Perhaps the author implements these quotations to delineate the distinctive spelling and pronunciation of these words in order to maintain the colloquial nature and the orality of Memín's speech. This does not occur with other characters whose lexicon is highly informal. An additional example that demonstrates difference via linguistic performance occurs during an episode at school, when Memín laughs to himself about his friend Ricardo being called "Señorito" by an employee who has come to pick up Ricardo from school. Memín is in a fit of laughter, which causes puzzled looks from his friends, who eventually ask the reason for his intense amusement. The proceeding dialogue between Memín and his friends is as follows:

- Ernesto: "*¿Quieres decirnos de qué te ríes?*"  
(Do you want to tell us what you're laughing at?)
  
- Memín: "*A Ricardo le llaman Señorito.*"  
(They call Ricardo *Señorito*.)

- Memín: "*Mi Ma' Linda*<sup>12</sup> *me contó que ella fue señorita, y cuando se casó empezaron a decirle señora.*"  
(My Ma' Linda told me that she was *señorita*, and when she got married they started calling her *señora*.)
- Ernesto: "*¿Y eso qué?*"  
(So what about that?)
- Memín: "*Que cuando Ricardo se case, le dirán Señor.*"  
(When Ricardo gets married, they will call him *Señor*.)
- Carlos<sup>13</sup>: "*Sangrón*"  
(Smart-aleck.)

This example demonstrates a complete misunderstanding of a basic term in Castilian Spanish. This exchange illustrates that Memín does not seem to understand or is not aware of the correct terminology that is used to address persons, male and female, before and after being married. He also seems to misinterpret the term *Señorito*, a term of deference and respect spoken to a child by an employee or servant, in this case a chauffeur. Perhaps this is indicative of the fact that Memín has never been placed in a situation in which an employee or servant has addressed him with such deference, or in which he has had to

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<sup>12</sup> Ma' Linda is the term that Memín uses to refer to his mother. Her actual name is Eufrosina.

<sup>13</sup> Carlos is another classmate of Memín.

refer to someone else with such specified terminology. If that is the case, this example clearly demonstrates Memín's social or class status. But this explanation would not fully account for the reactions of his two other friends, Carlos and Ernesto, who themselves are also from a lower class, yet find Memín's amusement puzzling and silly. In turn, this misinterpretation can also be read as a means to use language as a tool to differentiate Memín not only in terms of his class status, but also his racial classification. To be black is to be poor. And, furthermore, to be black, as demonstrated in this particular case, is to misunderstand or to be disaffiliated from a foundational marker of *lo mexicano* and *mexicanidad*: Castilian Spanish.

As such, I submit that this dialogue provides a coding of linguistic deviation that is critical in marking difference and *otherness* within a collective imaginary—Memín is often unintelligible to other characters and readers alike. And, in relation to Walter Mignolo's theorization of the political and social role of language and linguistic affiliation, Memín's linguistic dis-placement, as seen in this passage, prevents him from being "intrinsically linked to community formation

and geopolitical configurations” (249). His speech acts to dis-place him from the larger, national imagined community.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the linguistic difference and dis-placement of blackness, religion presents another frame in which to mark Memín’s alienation and dislocation. As with language, religion is another imperial tool of domination. The role of Christianity, specifically Catholicism, is intimately tied to the invention of the New World and the conquest and exploitation of peoples of Indigenous and African descent throughout Latin American and Mexican history. Even as an independent nation-state, religion was tied to citizenship, when the 1821 Plan de Iguala guaranteed the supremacy of the Catholic church, as only Catholics could be Mexican citizens. While freedom of religion was later guaranteed, the Church has continued to maintain intimate ties with civil authorities and is an ever-present marker in the socio-cultural and religious life of the country.

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<sup>14</sup> It is also important to note that, during this time period, José Vasconcelos, acting as the Minister of Education in Mexico, created programs to “*castellanizar al indio*” (Castilianize the Indian) in an effort to promote progress and civilization within Amerindian communities. This is another example of the powerful relationships between language and nation.

In this respect, we turn to another episode in the comic series, which problematizes Memín's relationship with Mexican society, vis a vis the Church. Memín and his friends are making a list of their "*pecados*" (sins) for their first communion. A different boy, not in the group of companions, seeks out Memín and mocks him, saying that he will never go to heaven because he is black. Despite his friends reassurances, "*el color de la piel nada tiene que ver con el alma* (skin color has nothing to do with the soul)," Memín interiorizes this problematic aspect of his being. He responds, "*Si eres bueno tu alma tiene que ser blanca...los negros no entran al cielo* (If you are good your soul has to be white...blacks don't enter into heaven)." After this response, he proceeds to terrorize whomever and whatever he encounters on the street. On the other hand, his friends rush to visit the Priest, explaining the situation with Memín, and claiming that if they paint some "*angelitos negros*" (black angels) on one of the church posters, Memín will believe that blacks do indeed go to heaven. The remainder of this episode does play out as such: Memín agrees to visit the church and, upon seeing angels that look like him, he is convinced that people of his kind do go to heaven.

This episode presents a critical thinking of very serious content. First, it problematizes racial representation in religious iconography (see the discussion of the film *Angelitos negros* below). There are practically no black figures in Catholic depictions. In this specific case, the boys have to falsify an image in order to convince Memín of his inclusion in Catholic representation, and thus his inclusion in the corresponding religious opportunities: the opportunity to go to heaven with others who look like him. It is to be noted that the Virgen de Guadalupe provides for a visualization of brown inclusion into the representations of this powerful institution; however, black is generally invisible. Second, this episode itself presents an interesting perspective in regards to the relationship between race and religion. I propose that it puts into question the links between whiteness and Christianity, and how this association has been a tool to practice exclusive membership, whether in relation to a local institution, a community, a nation, or a world order.

In addition to externalizing and epidermalizing Memín's difference, inferiority, and alienation, this scene also offers a response

to the tensions of the inclusion of blackness in national (Mexican) and religious (Catholic) spheres. The other boys' action of painting a black image in the Church presents an attempt to rescue the black figure from invisibility and alienation. Albeit it is a false image, this act does offer a space that does imagine blackness as a part of and as placed within the structures of Mexican society (in this case, linked to the Catholic Church).

In fact, there are several other instances in the series in which Memín's difference is subdued and attempted to be integrated into the larger structures around him. On the first day of school, when all the students introduce themselves, Memín is mocked by his classmates for his strange appearance (see my comments above on the terms used by his classmates to mock and mark his physical difference). Yet, the teacher of the class demands silence from the other children who are ridiculing Memín's appearance. Similarly, in another scene, when the mother of Ricardo finds Memín in a bathroom closet in her house (the boys had bathed together after an afternoon of fun together), we find another moment in which Memín's alienation is met with attempted integration. Upon finding Memín in the closet, Ricardo's mother,



Mercedes, screams "*¡Qué horror, un chango* (what horror, a monkey)!" Her stereotype places Memín and, in turn, the black body in the most primitive of places as she mistakes him for an ape. However, after the whole debacle, Ricardo's father, Rogelio, urges Mercedes to calm down, that "*este niño es como cualquier otro* (this child is like any other)" and he demands that she treat all her son's friends "*como si fueran de las mejores familias* (as if they belong to the best families)."

In these two scenes we observe the role of a male, patriarchal figure attempting to assuage the anxieties of other characters toward the black figure. I suggest that this is a strategic reflection of the larger narrative of *mestizaje* that claims to integrate blackness within the framework of cosmic mixture. That is, as an extension of this narrative and the process of *mestizaje*, the presence of a patriarchal figure serves to mediate the national, social tensions towards blackness (see my comments in section 2.4 regarding the patriarchal role of the State as a figure of salvation and mediation).

## **2.2 *Angelitos negros: Absorbing Blackness and Saving the National Family***

Another site of cultural production that also operates on the medium of a visual performance of blackness is film. As mentioned previously, during Mexico's "Golden Age, the cinema industry was extensively popular during this time period and contributed heavily to Mexico's economic sector. The film industry created products in the form of movie icons with whom the public could easily identify with (Delgadillo 414). And, as movies became "mediums for stars...stars became mediums for national myths," which resonated strategic narratives and messages directed to the diverse Mexican audience (Delgadillo 414). It is within this context, that foregrounds the didactic and social function of film, that I analyze two movies of the "Golden Age" era: *Angelitos negros* and *Al son del mambo*.

The first film, *Angelitos negros*, debuted in 1948 and is a melodrama directed by Joselito Rodriguez and based on the Fannie Hurst novel *Imitation of Life*. The most attractive characteristic of this movie is that it starred one of Mexico's most iconic and prolific actors,

Pedro Infante. The film narrates the personal and professional triumphs and tribulations of Infante who plays the lead character, José Carlos Ruiz. A successful musician, Ruíz falls in love with Ana Luisa de la Fuente, who is played by the charming blond actress, Emilia Guiu. The film explores the family dynamic between José Carlos, Ana Luisa, and Ana Luisa's black Nana, Mercé, who is actually Ana Luisa's mother. The true relationship between Nana and Ana Luisa is unknown to this white-skinned, blond mother, until she gives birth to a dark-skinned daughter, Belén. Nana does not reveal the fact that she is Ana Luisa's mother, and, following the instructions of a family priest, José Carlos takes the blame upon himself for the darker skin color of the daughter that Ana Luisa has rejected precisely for that reason. In order to avoid Ana Luisa having a nervous breakdown, José Carlos pretends that he is the biological contributor to the "*mala sangre*" or tainted blood that becomes visible through Belén's skin color. In fact, only towards the very end of the film is the true nature of the relationship between Ana Luisa and Nana revealed, when a dispute over the rejection of Belén results in Ana Luisa slapping Nana, causing this nanny and maid to fall down the stairs, and eventually succumb to her injuries. Upon her

death, the truth of their relationship is revealed and Ana Luisa finally accepts her racial heritage and her darker-skinned daughter.

In describing this basic plot, we are already able to see the performance of family tensions that surround issues of skin color, race, and the acceptance, integration, and rejection of blackness. And, as a microcosm of the larger national family, this movie is perfectly suited to display broader national anxieties towards the inclusion and exclusion of blackness. It presents a very fitting arena in which private (family) and public (nation) spaces are able to mingle together and converse about, address, debate, and reflect upon these issues. For example, the film displays the simultaneous rejection and acceptance of and integration with blackness. In terms of rejection, we see this portrayed by Ana Luisa in several instances: she rejects her dark-skinned daughter from birth, and goes as far as to blatantly question, "*¿Por qué Dios no me dio una hija blanca y rubia como la de Malú* (Why did God not give me a white and blond daughter like [her friend] Malú)?"; she consistently treats Nana with contempt and disdain, and even goes as far as to forbid Nana from attending her wedding; in relation to her husband José Carlos' performances that incorporate

Afro-Caribbean elements, Ana Luisa is perplexed at how "*una artista como usted se rebaja bailando con una mulata* (an artist like yourself can lower himself by dancing with a *mulata*);" and she expresses further rejection and derision of blackness when in contact with other black characters, namely Fernando and Isabel, who are close friends of and performers with José Carlos. For instance, when first introduced to Fernando, he extends his hand to greet Ana Luisa and tell her "*reconózcame como un amigo* (think of me as a friend)." Ana Luisa rejects his handshake and quickly excuses herself from the scene. Moreover, when José Carlos suggests that Fernando be a witness at their wedding, Ana Luisa again responds with rejection, stating that "*sería preferible una persona de más calidad* (it would be preferable to have a person of better quality)," and that Fernando's presence at the wedding would be "*una sombra opaca* (an opaque shadow)." Fernando does not attend the wedding of his close friend after she asks him not to be present.

I suggest that these examples of the disdain for and rejection of blackness that are demonstrated in the actions and speech acts of Ana Luisa resonate with national anxieties toward the inclusion of blacks

and blackness in Mexico. Popular sentiment within the nation echoes a similar perspective to that of Ana Luisa: blacks are viewed as lesser quality human beings (with whites being preferred and emulated), which is also coupled with the desire to excise blackness from within. This is similar to the actions of Ana Luisa, who attempts to deny the presence of black figures within her own personal sphere (she denies them place at her wedding), and even goes as far as to physically push blackness out (she slaps Nana, causing her to fall and ultimately die). That is, these actions of excision are representative of the national family that has also attempted to cut out and cut off any connections with blacks and blackness, despite broader narratives of inclusion and cosmic mixture.

In addition, this rejection of blackness is also seen from within and is portrayed as an internal excision of identity and identification. In a poignant scene that demonstrates self-rejection, José Carlos finds his young daughter Belén alone in her room putting white powder onto her face. When asked what she is doing, she responds: "*Quiero ser blanca para que mi Mamá me quiera* (I want to be white so that my Mommy loves me)." And, after Ana Luisa gives Belén a rare kiss on the

cheek in mockery of her daughter's actions, Belén responds with great jubilation, points to her cheek and says: "*Mi Mamá me besó aquí porque ya soy blanca, ya soy blanca* (My mother kissed me here because I am finally white, I am finally white)."

I suggest that this scene is a psychological and physical performance of the inner turmoil and (self)rejection of blackness. It is indicative of a Fanonian moment in which (black) self-consciousness and the internalization of inferiority is "epidermalized," and results in the individual facing a "double-bind" of alienation (turning white) or disappearance as a result of rejection. Here, the culmination of Belén's experience of the double-bind is projected as she physically dons a white mask (she covers her face in white powder) in order to avoid the rejection of her mother. This rejection has resulted in her sense of invisibility which plays out in several instances in which Ana Luisa fails to even acknowledge Belén as her own child. Yet, in her attempt to alienate her blackness and her own body by donning a white mask, Belén is still not fully accepted by her mother. Ana Luisa laughs as she kisses the child on her cheek, almost mocking Belén's attempt at

garnering her mother's love and recognition. This experience echoes Sartre's portrayal of the Jewish condition in an anti-Semitic world:

His life is nothing but a long flight from others and himself. He has been alienated even from his own body; his emotional life has been cut up in two; he has been reduced to pursuing the impossible dream of universal brotherhood in a world that rejects him. (135)

Confronted by this painful experience, Belén chooses alientation over rejection and invisibility. She attempts to *free* herself from this double-bind by masking her blackness, in essence by rejecting herself and her skin color, which would in turn theoretically allow her to fulfill her desire to gain her mother's acceptance and recognition through whitening (Azar 2).

Moreover, I propose that this scene which marks blackness as an experience split between alienation and disappearance, also illustrates how blackness continues to be placed in the position of colonization or coloniality. More specifically, here we view how the identity (and perhaps humanity) of the dark-skinned individual is dependent upon recognition from the light-skinned other. As Fanon states in *Black Skin, White Masks*, it is "the recognition by that other being, that his own human worth and reality depend" (217). That is, the inferior other



can only gain or be granted worth when recognized by a superior other. In the case of Belén, her identity and her own self-consciousness and self-worth is predicated on her mother's recognition or lack thereof. As a dark-skinned child she is rejected by her mother, an act that denies recognition and results in self-hatred and internalized inferiority. However, only through an act of whitening does Belén seem to gain some sense of self-worth as, in her innocent eyes, she seems to garner her mother's recognition (it is not an authentic recognition; this only becomes more sincere at the end of the film upon Nana's death). This dependence on the dominant other for one's (self)consciousness and self-worth in precisely the condition and experience of coloniality where identity is relational and, in the case of the inferior subject, where "one's soul [is measured] by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (Du Bois 5). For Belén, who I suggest is indicative of the condition of contemporary blackness in Mexico, especially in this "Golden Age" time period, her self-worth and sense of self are determined and measured by the world around her (represented by her very own mother), which looks

on in pity and contempt as she is forced to choose between self-rejection or disappearance.<sup>15</sup> As such, this “struggle of flesh” (Anzaldúa 100), results in a construction and a condition of blackness that are plagued by tension and internalized and externalized conflict, which echo the national tensions regarding the compatibility, place, and integration of blackness within a broader sphere of identity (in this case, the identity of the *mestizo* family and the larger *mestizo* nation).

While the film *Angelitos negros* voices and epidermalizes these tensions and questions surrounding the place and incorporation of blackness in Mexico, it also simultaneously offers a didactic response that foregrounds the possibility of and the need to move beyond these tensions and accept the dark-skinned body (child) into the national family. This alternative engagement and relationship with blackness in incarnated in the central protagonist José Carlos Ruiz, who is played

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<sup>15</sup> (Self)disappearance does become a real option, as Belén even goes as far as to refuse food (akin to a hunger strike) after her mother, Ana Luisa, temporarily moves out of the home due to the tensions that have arisen from her rejection of Belén. Here we see how a light-skinned mother’s rejection of her dark-skinned child precipitates the child’s own desire to not exist and to disappear (Belén is in poor health after refusing to eat because her mother has abandoned the family).

by Pedro Infante. Ruiz is portrayed as the quintessential Mexican. In the film he is a popular musician and singer who travels Latin America performing classical Mexican ballads such as mariachi, Mexicanized conga, and ranchera-bolero music styles (Delgadillo 415). His entourage of performers also represents a diverse repertoire: his close friends who perform with him are black (from Cuba). His acceptance and seeming embrace of diverse peoples and cultures portrays him as a foil to his new bride, Ana Luisa.<sup>16</sup> In fact, he never seems to mind the “*gotita de tinta* (drop of [dark] ink)” that is a part of his professional and personal world. In addition, this perspective and attitude towards blacks and blackness is further augmented when Ruiz himself dons blackface during some of his performances. Theresa Delgadillo suggests that this is a move that “represents the desire to absorb blackness into the Latin American ideal of *mestizaje*...with the

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<sup>16</sup> Ana Luisa can be seen as symbolic extension of the Malinche who, as a traitor to her race, puts in peril the strength and survival of her family, which is symbolic of the nation. This instance where a female character is framed as traitor or as someone who goes against the national way is also seen in the portrayal of Ricardo’s mother in the *Memín* series. Again, we see a woman who is uneasy with blacks and blackness. And, similar to the case of *Angelitos negros*, in the *Memín* series we see a male family head (the patriarchal image) come to the rescue and, in a didactic move, instruct the mother to accept these darker bodies as part of the family, nation, society.

aim of eventual incorporation" (415). In fact, I submit that the role of Blackface as an act of incorporation matches the message in the original poem "Píntame angelitos negros" on which the premise of the film is also based. Written in the 1940's by the Venezuelan poet, politician, and diplomat Andrés Eloy Blanco, this poem protests Venezuela's racial discrimination and calls for "greater representation for Venezuela's mixed race and black populations" (Delgadillo 410). Blanco evokes the absence of black angels in religious iconography, and he uses religion as a space in which to reflect upon and to pursue dialogue about (the lack of) black participation not only in religious spheres, but in political, social, and cultural spheres as well.

Coupled with the image and role of the character José Carlos Ruiz, I propose that the film's titular reference to this Venezuelan poem strikes a similar chord in calling for dialogue regarding the black presence and participation in Mexican society. Moreover, I contend that one of the main goals of this film is to make visible and visualize this dialogue in the hopes of easing national tensions towards the inclusion of blacks and blackness into the national body. If the quintessential Mexican protagonist can absorb blackness, why can the

nation not do the same? In fact, it is the positioning of Ruiz as a patriarchal (national) hero who, in his engagement with racial and cultural diversity, can save not only his family, but the nation as well. He is the character who sacrifices for his family (he initially takes the blame for the dark skin color of his daughter) and continues to insist on the inclusion of dark-skinned others, namely his daughter, as part of the (national) family. For example, when confronting Ana Luisa for not participating in Belen's fourth birthday party, Ruiz states:

*La pobre criatura podrá llevar esa sangre que tú aborreces, pero también lleva la tuya y por más que te empeñes en negarla ante el mundo, seguirá siendo tu hija ante Dios* (the poor creature can carry that blood that you abhor, but she also carries your blood and as much as you insist on rejecting her in front of the world, she will keep on being your daughter before God).

I suggest that this statement expresses the need to discontinue rejecting and instead include blackness (the black child) into the nation (and family) because it is already a part of it. Through *mestizaje*, there is no denying that "esa sangre (that blood)" is already a part of the national, mestizo body. And moreover, like a Catholic savior (so fitting for a nation so connected with the Catholic church), the patriarchal figure of José Carlos Ruiz reminds the viewer and his own family that it

should be the Mexican way, *lo mexicano*, and the Catholic way to accept and integrate blackness and all those “*angelitos negros*.”

### **2.3 *Al son del mambo: Discovering and Modernizing the Primitive Place of Blackness***

While the patriarchal protagonist of the film *Angelitos negros* would come to the rescue of the national family and epidermalize and vocalize an integration of blackness through absorption, the film *Al son del mambo* illuminated a similar framework of patriarchal salvation. Debuting in 1950, this film directed by Chano Urueta was a musical comedy set within the dichotomous spaces of urban and rural, primitive life. The film portrays the journey of three Mexicans who travel to Cuba in search of musical inspiration and in order to escape the chaos of rampant industrialization and urbanization that is flooding the Mexican landscape during this time period. With images of transatlantic ships, black smoke billowing from industrial factory pipes, and loud engine noise taking over the opening scenes, one of the three travelers, Chon Godinez (played by Adalberto Martínez) physically shuts the windows of his room lamenting “*esta civilización me*

*atormenta* (this civilization tortures me)." He meets up with two other Mexicans and a blond woman from the United States, who all share his desire for "*la verdadera vida, no falsa como en la ciudad* (the true life, not false as in the city)." The very next scene cuts to the travelers departing on a mule-driven cart in search of a pure, primitive, rural landscape. And, as they are transported into another time and place, the song "Píntame angelitos negros" plays in the background as Godinez protectively caresses a young black boy. This scene is the first introduction of blackness, in a physical and aesthetic manifestation. The black boy, who has no speaking role in the film, similar to most of the black characters, seems to be pondering the central question of this song: are there no black angels in the paintings of heaven? With a look of lamentation on his face, Godinez's protective caresses seem to attempt to assuage the boy's sadness. This is an empathetic gesture on one hand, yet simultaneously, I also argue, a symbolic nod to the power structures in a colonial framework in which the colonizer (and here too the patriarchal figure), represented by Godinez, embodies a role of salvation of those who cannot uplift themselves. The film continues as the travelers visit different sites and the main hotel/dance hall where "*se respire un aire puro* (one can breathe pure air)" in the

“País de la vida (Country of Life).” They are also surrounded by musical interludes and sensual dancing, an exotic pairing within this primitive space.

It is within this context of exotic and primitive frames that the hotel’s well-known and popular musician, Dámaso Pérez Prado, is introduced. This iconic Cuban bandleader and musician, who is known as the “King of the Mambo” in real life, takes on a role that imitates his actual musical accomplishments, especially in being touted by some as the original composer of the mambo musical genre. In the film, one of the Mexican travelers, Roberto Dávila (played by Roberto Romaña), who plays the role of a frustrated musician in search of inspiration, begins to follow Pérez Prado around the rural compound. Pérez Prado is walking around slowing, noting all the sounds of nature that he hears around him. Dávila is fascinated with this act and approaches Prado to find out what he is doing. Prado explains that he is a “*coleccionista de ruidos y sonidos* (collector of noises and sounds),” and he demonstrates the sounds that he has collected, such as “*la gallinita sobre la arena dice tick tick tick* (the little hen on the sand



says tick tick tick).” Dávila is amazed at the sounds that Prado can note with such precision. And he asks the Cuban musician:

*¿A usted no se le ha ocurrido organizar varios de estos sonidos? Esto es, ¿irlo repartiendo en diversos instrumentos musicales, hasta hacer con ellos una obra grande, muy grande (Has it ever occurred to you to organize these sounds? That is, to divide them into diverse musical instruments, using them to make a large [musical] piece)?*

Prado responds that he has never tried to do this, “*me parece muy difícil* (it seems too difficult to me).” But, “*si encontrara alguien que me dijera como puedo instrumentar* (if I found someone who could tell me how I could compose)...” Dávila immediately replies to Prado, asking him, “*¿quiere que yo le ayude* (do you want me to help you)?” Prado accepts this offer in an instant.

Immediately following this scene, the two musicians work together to compose novel pieces, Dávila writing the musical score while Prado plays out the rhythms on a piano. After this musical connection, the pieces are performed during the film, with Dávila acting as the band’s manager who introduces these new, exotic productions as:

*un ritmo distinto, formado por los elementos más primitivos y sencillos de la naturaleza que excita e incita a la alegría y a la*

*danza* (a distinct rhythm, formed from the most primitive and simple rhythms of nature that excite and incite happiness and dance).

The musical productions become successful and impress an associate of Godinez, named Don Alta, who later donates a large sum of money to the Cuban hotel and dancehall which has been threatened to be closed by the original land owners who want to sell the property. With the success of this novel musical invention and the financial contribution of Don Alta, the hotel/dance hall's director (played by Rita Montaner) is able to buy the land and keep the compound and its pure, primitive, and exotic, music intact. In noting these two gestures, Dávila taking on the role of a manager who has "discovered" this primitive musical style, and Don Alta's financial rescue of the rural compound, we again see a framework of a colonial power structure in which the more powerful, civilized colonizer discovers and saves and perhaps even tames the exotic, primitive types. Homi Bhabha theorizes this as the setting up of the racist stereotype as it functions in a colonial discourse, in which the racial, cultural, economic, and intellectual superiority of the colonizer legitimizes the need for colonial intervention (94-96). I argue that this legitimization of colonial intervention comes in the form of discovery and rescue: first, in

Dávila's performance of the role of a traveler who *discovers* this exotic music (he is the one who guides Pérez Prado in how to "*instrumentar*" all those sounds of nature); second, in how this *discovery*, together with the wealthy Mexican business associate's financial contribution, rescues the compound from impending closure. And we see the colonial discourses of discovery and salvation come into play via stereotypes set up by the racialized binaries of civilized/primitive, wealthy/poor, tame/exotic, and white/black. Thus, in their search for primitive purity, which they find in black Cuba, these Mexican sojourners "paternalistically guide the former out of its arrested development toward their idealized form of social and cultural progress" (Garcia 517). That is, only with the aid and intervention of the light-skinned, civilized Mexicans' intervention, can the black, primitive Cubans be lead into a context of development and progress, a perfect echo of the narrative of *mestizaje* as whiteness leads the darker races into the *porvenir*.

## **2.4 On Framing Blackness and Popular Culture as a Racialized Regime of Representation<sup>17</sup>**

These three works, the comic series *Memín Pinguín* and the films *Angelitos negros* and *Al son del Mambo* are very significant in examining how blackness is framed and performed in the popular culture of Mexico's "Golden Age." First, blackness is often presented as racialized stereotypes: an uncivilized and uncouth pickaninny (Memín); a maid and nanny (Nana) who is treated as inferior and often referenced by numerous nicknames that epidermalize her racial identity (these names include: *tablilla de chocolate*, *negrita santa*, *viejita traviesa*, *negra fea*, *bolita de chapopote*, *negra metiche*); and primitive, exotic, and hypersexual musicians. All of these racialized types and figures help to construct and make visible notions and images of difference. And, I propose that these representations and practices of difference have several functions in the mediation and production of powerful narratives that sustain particular codes of belonging that frame *lo mexicano* and construct a strategic

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<sup>17</sup> I incorporate Stuart Hall's theorization of culture as a "racialized regime of representation" that incorporates and propagates stereotypes as a form of othering.

cartography of *mexicanidad*. First, I argue that they create binaries: us/them, primitive/civilized, darker/lighter, exotic/tame, poor/wealthy, black/white. And, second, as Stuart Hall theorizes, these cultural productions as “racialized regimes of representation” allow for blackness to be framed as other as a result of these binaries, which in turn further articulate codes of belonging (249): who belongs in the family, the group, and the nation. In the case of Mexico, the question of cultural, racial, and social belongingness is critical during this time period of social and political fragmentation. I argue that coding who does and who does not belong is a strategic move in manufacturing and commodifying unification, *forjando patria*, and in facilitating the making of an imagined community of those who are marked as belonging. Within this frame, blacks and blackness represented and stereotyped as primitive, exotic, and uncivilized, present problematic constructs that do not neatly belong as such in a modern, civilized Mexico. Instead, it is only through social and cultural salvation, civilization/modernization, and (biological) whitening, that blackness can be absorbed and integrated into the nation. Again, this is the echo of the operational logic of the discourse of *mestizaje* that marks the

destiny of blackness as an object to be civilized and whitened, and faded into brown.

Moreover, in order for these frames of difference to be effective, blackness must also be essentialized and naturalized. That is, in marking blackness as a purely biological construct mediated and made visible via skin color, it is easier to type and stereotype blacks and blackness within frames of difference. In these three works, blackness is represented, articulated, and mitigated through skin color: Memín's dark body is consistently othered through color; the use of color in the form of blackface symbolically and physically transforms several characters in *Angelitos negros*; and primitive color marks the difference of the black inhabitants of Cuba in *Al son del mambo*. Furthermore, this role of skin color and coding of blackness as an essentially biological construct allow for a naturalization of racial difference where the body becomes sign and signifier of one's being (Hall 266). That is, the body becomes the primary site on which and with which to code and mark blackness. It is the black body that can be absorbed, disappeared, whitened, altered, and commodified in order

to better fit into a social and cultural fabric that remains uneasy towards its inclusion and place within the nation.

On the contrary, blackness that has not been civilized, modernized, and whitened is dis-located or dis-placed from Mexico and the *mestizo* family/nation. That is, all that is purely black (unlike the characters in blackface) is not found in Mexico. Rather, it is found in Cuba. In fact, I suggest that it is very interesting that all three of these works align “authentic” and pure blackness with Cuba. For example, Yolanda Vargas Dulché only encounters authentic blackness as she travels to Cuba and encounters all the *niños negros*. Similarly, in both films, the “authentic” and primitive blacks are also located in Cuba. This dis-placement of blackness onto Cuba is indicative of another anxiety of this time period: the growing population of black Cubans in Mexico, especially in Mexico City (Garcia 517). This was a time period of increased cultural exchange between Cuba and Mexico, and resulted in many Cuban artists immigrating to Mexico. Many Mexicans did not approve of nor appreciate these darker immigrants. For instance, in 1951 the Mexican critic Federico Ortiz Jr. describes the mambo:

[It] is nothing more than a classic deformation of the songs of the old African tribes [and] foreign melodies that originated in North American jazz...It is the hope that the entire Americas react against this particular [music] and support the popular music of their own people, thereby displacing the music that comes to us from outside. (7)

Ortiz marks the mambo as essentially foreign and associates it with Africa and with African-American culture in the United States (jazz). According to this critic's statement, culture from these *darker* places has no space in Mexico. It is not part of the popular music of its "own people" (unlike the great cultural investment in Amerindian cultures). Moreover, as the mambo was often labeled as primitive and hypersexual, we can see how it was perceived as a threat to the racial and cultural integrity of Mexico (not to mention that the U.S. as a whole was also often envisioned as an imperial threat to Mexico during this time period). As such, the displacement of blackness on a cultural and racial level becomes another tool with which to maintain and protect the *mestizo* nation on the road to modernity.

Finally, in conjunction with these frameworks of difference, protectionism, salvation, and the demarcation of imagined community and codes of belonging that are produced by the cultural production of



Mexico's "Golden Age," I also propose that this function of culture is an extension of the patriarchal state and a propagation of the *national-cultural*. That is to say, during this time period, where cultural, social, and political stability was much sought after, I argue that the State needed to create a space in which it could widely and effectively disseminate narratives that would legitimate its interventions in the political, social (and racial) tensions of the time. As discussed in this chapter, all three works that I analyze voice and make visible the tensions towards the inclusion of blacks and blackness. Whether within the home and family (*Memín* and *Angelitos negros*), the classroom (*Memín*), or within the nation's space of cultural manifestations (*Al son del mambo*), we are able to pick up on the uneasy gaze that meets the black body. Despite its call for cosmic integration, the *mestizo* nation still harbors anxiety toward the black blood that runs through its past and present, in turn also expressing uncertainty about what this will mean for its future. The cultural production of this era and these specific works express these anxieties, and thus sets-up the stage for justified intervention that will assuage these tensions. And, onto the stage walks the patriarchal state (represented and symbolized by several of the male protagonists in these three works) to rescue,

discover, tame, and civilize the problematic social and racial elements that are the root and/or target of these tensions, and which represent an unknown and challenging fragment that threatens the desire to achieve social and cultural stability, racial integrity, and modernity.

The State has every interest in saving, preserving, and managing the larger national family, especially at the end of Revolution. And the power of the State to intervene in these tensions that were framed, performed, and mediated in the sphere of popular culture, was intricately linked to the culture industry. For example, beginning with the administration of Álvaro Obregon (1920-1924), cultural production, especially visual culture such as *gacetas*, *historietas*, and murals, was directly connected to state projects of imagined community in order to provide pictorial narrations that forged a "community of [shared] national experience (Rochfort 7). As noted by Serge Gruzinski, just as pictures had exercised a significant role in the discovery, conquest, and colonization of the New World (12), visual culture continued to be a "key site for constructing political power in Mexico" (Mraz 116). It was a form of communication that was much more easily accessible to large audiences at a time in which

illiteracy rates were still high. Messages and narratives were much more effectively transferred to the average citizen who could literally *picture* the information being conveyed. Furthermore, the connections between visual culture and the state imbued this medium with greater, official social and political leverage. For example, as Minister of Education during the administration of Obregón, José Vasconcelos greatly supported the role of the visual arts in education and public venues, aided in the commission of murals in exclusive spaces such as the National Palace, and served as a pivotal figure in facilitating the return of Diego Rivera from Paris back to Mexico.

In addition, the State's relationship with cultural production, especially in a visual format, was also amplified with its presence in the production and diffusion of illustrated media and the publication industry. The creation of PIPSA, Productora e Importadora de Papel, Sociedad Anónima, in 1935, further increased the presence and power of the state in the media and in illustrated forms of communication. This government entity provided inexpensive paper and newsprint to newspapers and magazines (the big publishers of comics, *gacetillas*, and *historietas*). And, since it was able to use government subsidies

and public funds in order to insure low cost paper products to Mexican publishers, the organization eliminated other national and international paper sources and in turn monopolized the industry. The success and influence of PIPSA was so extensive, that it became the literal backbone of print and illustrated media industry that publicized the actions and activities of ruling political leaders. For instance, images in the popular news magazines or *gacetillas* of political figures belonging to the PRI “inaugurating new industrial accomplishments, meeting with international business leaders, or announcing social programs” (Mraz 123), helped the State, by way of PIPSA, to insure what kinds of images and thus information was disseminated in *gacetillas* that were widely consumed by vast segments of the public. As such, politics and power were inherently linked and intertwined with the images and messages communicated and disseminated in visual culture, and thus the State’s messages and perspectives were consumed by Mexicans across class, age, gender, and region. In fact, many suggest that the ruling party at the time, the PRI, would not have had as much as success as it did in its economic and political projects if not for the cultural projects that were supported or put in place. Juan Carlos Ramírez Pimienta goes as far as to say that the State’s role in and

connection with cultural projects and the culture industry served as “most important” branch in serving the “nationalistic unifying intention” of those in power (211). In this respect the power and presence of the government behind the content and distribution of illustrated print media and cultural production demonstrates that:

It is not the invisible hand that Gramscian hegemony so often seems to represent; [instead] here we can see how the interactions of individual bureaucrats, entrepreneurs, activists, and artists reinforce a political, social and economic hierarchy. (Rubenstein 7)

As such, we see how the motives of the racial state (as outlined in the first chapter), were mediated, performed, and disseminated through the cultural state. Furthermore, we also note how cultural production of this time period reflected which specific figures had the power and the “freedom to self-interrogate, challenge, and change” the social landscape of the Mexico (hooks). In this case, it is the patriarchal male/State that is marked as the powerful figures within the family, community, and nation. And, finally, in order to achieve the ultimate goals of modernity and *forjando patria*, the performance and representation of blacks and blackness in “Golden Age” Mexican culture served to produce and disseminate frames in which to express

and intervene in the nation's tensions, and to maintain a society on a path towards a unified and modernized *porvenir*.

## CHAPTER THREE

### ***Cimarronaje cultural:* Towards a Counter-Cartography of Blackness and Belonging in Mexico**

*Place, one might add, is the location  
of a multiplicity of forms of cultural politics,  
that is of the cultural-becoming-political.*

-Arturo Escobar

In his essay on the alternative constructions of place by black social movements and communities in the Pacific rainforest region of Colombia, the anthropologist Arturo Escobar delineates the roles of strategies of localization in place-based consciousness. In particular, he suggests that the construction of place “is central to issues of development, culture, and the environment, and is equally essential for imagining other contexts for thinking about the construction of politics, knowledge and identity” (155). He further proposes that it is important to intervene in discussions and analyses of place in order to connect them with the political strategies of social movements who are attempting to counter the placeless-ness that has marked their identity and existence.

Escobar's theorization of place as a "location of a multiplicity of forms of cultural politics" that are manifested in political strategies that counter placelessness, is a useful paradigm with which to interject in the framing and performance of blackness in contemporary Mexico. As discussed in the previous two chapters, blackness has been mapped beyond and displaced from dominant and official constructions and representations of *mexicanidad*. That is, in a strategic time period following the Revolution, blackness has been problematized, silenced, and often de-linked as seen in numerous sites of knowledge and cultural production that operate via the logic of coloniality/modernity: blackness is coded as uncivilized and inferior by the Vasconcelian discourse of *mestizaje*; portrayed as anachronistic and pre-modern in the work of influential, Mexican anthropologists of that time (Gonzalo Aguirre Belrán and Manuel Gamio), and in sites that extend this anthropological vision (the *Museo de la Ciudad* in Veracruz); and performed and imaged as foreign, primitive, and hypersexual in "Golden Age" popular culture (*Memín Pinguín* and the films *Angelitos negros* and *Al son del mambo*). As such, these sites and spaces have produced, facilitated, and disseminated a vision of the relationship



between blackness and *mexicanidad* as problematic, uneasy and often contradictory. And more so, they are sites and spaces that continue to propagate racialized constructions of being and belonging that have contributed to the mapping of blackness beyond the geo-political and bio-political borders of *mexicanidad*.

As a result, today one is often met with the notion that “*no hay negros en México*” (there are no blacks in Mexico), and if placed or “found” within Mexico, blackness is *cubano* (Cuban). While originating from the vibrant Cuban migration and cultural exchange with Mexico in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, this association between blackness and Cuba is so ingrained that today, when stopped at military checkpoints, Afro-Mexicans are often asked to sing the Mexican national anthem in order to prove their *Mexicanness*, not their Cubanness. So, we are then left to ask, is *this* place-less and de-linked cartography of blackness the only relationship with contemporary *mexicanidad*? Are Afro-Mexicans today still destined to be marooned and mapped beyond the borders of Mexico?

On the contrary, one just needs to look to the Mexican geobody, from the metropolitan centers to the tiny, rural fishing villages, to the beats of the Marimba, to the versos in the *chilenas*. Blackness and Afro-Mexicans are certainly present, visible, and placed in their relationship with *mexicanidad*. Though not counted for by an official census or via constitutional recognition, they are what Gloria Anzaldúa calls “*lo propio* (one’s own),” and not that which is “*lo heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto* (that which is inherited, acquired, and imposed)” (104). That is, blackness and Afro-Mexicans are as integral to the social, cultural, political, and economic contemporary landscape as any other population within Mexico, and they are speaking from their own locus of enunciation, and not continuously being spoken for by others<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Here we can again reference the coloniality of knowledge in which a seemingly invisible and neutral voice and corpus of knowledge speak for others and assigns and imposes meaning and value upon them. We know from the logic of coloniality that this “seemingly universal” locus of enunciation is in fact not neutral and, due to uneven structures of power and processes of racialization, it is a voice that forges an uneven paradigm of meaning and being by assigning less valuable meaning and inferior being to others who are spoken for.

In this chapter I examine constructions of “*lo propio*” by Afro-Mexicans themselves. More specifically, I present an analysis of contemporary cultural production by artists and social activists within Afro-Mexican communities in the Costa Chica region in southern Mexico. In particular, I focus on the role of cultural production as a political tool in re-constructing place-based consciousness and in re-articulating blackness and Afro-Mexican identity in Mexico. In addition, in the sense of the “cultural-becoming-political,” I demonstrate how local Afro-Mexican artists, social activists, and cultural collectives are utilizing particular strategies of localization, which appropriate culture as a disclosive space that produces and disseminates knowledge about who they are and how they live. Moreover, I discuss how they are utilizing an alternative discourse of *cimarronaje* (maroonage) as a place-making narrative that counteracts the condition of invisibility that has contributed to a segregated relationship between blackness and *mexicanidad*. I propose that the discourse of *cimarronaje cultural* is being deployed as a local, national, and global place-making narrative and cartographic tool that serves as a decolonial project of constructing knowledge and being, and as a strategy of re-existence, relocation, resilience, and innovation. As such, in this analysis of the

"multiple locations of cultural politics" in Afro-Mexican communities, I present a counter-cartography of the relationship between blackness and *mexicanidad*, which offers a theoretical compass that interrogates the geo-politics and bio-politics of race, space, and place in Mexico.

### **3.1 *Articulating the Place of Blackness in the Costa Chica***

The Costa Chica (translated as the "small coast") is a region along the Pacific coast encompassing the Mexican states of Oaxaca and Guerrero. Almost 400 kilometers in length, this region extends from just east of Acapulco in the state of Guerrero, to Huatulco in the state of Oaxaca. The geography of the region ranges from a series of planes, coastal flatlands, and hills, which have contributed to extensive fishing communities and those dedicated to raising livestock and agricultural products such as bananas, corn, and mango ("Costa Chica De Guerrero," *Costa Chica Nuestra*).

In relation to this dissertation, the most notable characteristic of the Costa Chica is its diverse populations, especially those of African

descent. In the pre-Columbian era, the area was home to numerous Indigenous communities, primarily the Mixtec and Amuzgo, as well as smaller Tlapanec and Chitano communities. Today, the Amuzgo primarily reside in Guerrero and the Mixtec in Oaxaca ("Costa Chica De Guerrero," *Costa Chica Nuestra*). In addition to these indigenous communities, it is also the well-documented and sizable presence of Afro-Mexicans that distinguishes the Costa Chica. In contrast to Afro-descendant communities along the Gulf coast in the state of Veracruz, these communities along the Pacific coast have experienced greater geographic isolation (Aguirre Beltrán 7-8). This has resulted in them being the more common subject and object of ethnographic study by national and international scholars who have attempted to search for "Africanisms"<sup>19</sup> and reconstruct specific cultural elements that are particular to an African heritage in Mexico. There is extensive documentation of the incorporation of elements and practices such as carrying objects on top of one's head, using round thatch-roofed houses called *redondos*, as well as of religious traditions, music, and

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<sup>19</sup> Africanisms refer to the term used by Kevin Yelvington to describe the survivals or continuities of African cultures that exist in the New World.

social organization that link these communities to Afro-descendent expressions and African roots.

The African presence in the Costa Chica is a result of colonial expansion in the area and the need for a larger labor force following the destruction and migration of the local Indigenous communities and the seizure of their lands. African slaves were transported to the region in order to work on large plantations, such as that of Mariscal de Castilla, who held control of extensive property and people from the 16 century until the Revolution in 1910 ("Costa Chica De Guerrero," *Costa Chica Nuestra*). In addition to the slave trade, other narratives related to the history of the African presence in the Costa Chica have circulated throughout the region. For example, an oral tradition claims that the communities are also descendants of African maroons who escaped the shipwreck of the *Puerta de Oro* along the Pacific coast. Nuemeros Afro-Mexicans claim that the black communities in the Costa Chica are the descendants of these maroons.

However, despite this rich history and their social, cultural, political, and economic contributions made to the region and to the nation, the majority of the Afro-Mexican communities in the Costa Chica often confront conditions of extreme poverty, lack of government investment and infrastructure, and discrimination. In fact, Guerrero and Oaxaca are two of the poorest states in the Union. Unlike Indigenous communities, there is no current constitutional recognition of Afro-Mexicans (see chapter one), which has resulted in these communities being left out of government and institutional programs that aid in funding for improved infrastructure, education, access to social and political resources, and federal investment in projects related to promoting Afro-Mexican cultural identity. And, as a further consequence of this exclusion and discrimination, the region itself is often perceived and referenced as a racialized space, "*la tierra de los negros, primitivo y atrasado* (the land of the blacks, primitive and backwards)," a framework that Roberto Dainotto describes as the "other within," a problematic space on the peripheries of the nation's center ("A South with a View" 379).

In spite of these social, political and economic challenges, the increased individual, community, and organizational activism from within the Costa Chica, that began in the past decade, has fostered greater attention to the contributions, rights, and goals of the Afro-descendent communities in this region. For example, the *Museo de las Culturas Afromestizas* in Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero is dedicated to teaching about the African presence in Mexico. The museum displays information and items related to this Afro-Mexican history, including the slave trade, political and military contributions during the War of Independence and the Revolution, and artifacts used in contemporary cultural dances and celebrations. In comparison to the scope of the *Museo de la Ciudad* in Veracruz, I argue that this museum offers an entirely different vision and panorama of knowledge produced and disseminated about the history and actuality of Afro-descendents in Mexico. In the *Museo de las Culturas Afromestizas*, we do not see Mexicans of African descent or even blackness as an essentialized marker of the slave trade; instead, we see a much more rich and diverse profile that spans the centuries-long expressions and contributions of Afro-descendents in Mexico.



Moreover, civic organizations such as *México Negro A.C.* along with other community groups and local activists and scholars have convened an annual conference, the *Encuentro de Pueblos Negros* (Meeting of the Black Communities), in order to foster awareness of the history and traditions of these communities, and to increase attention to their social, political, and economic needs. This conference is held annually in March, the month designated by these communities themselves as Black Heritage Month (*el mes de la herencia negra*). As a result of their voices and efforts, in 2011 the Ministry of Indigenous Affairs announced that they would be creating a Department of Afro-Mexican Community Affairs in Oaxaca. As I stated previously, the juridical recognition of these communities is a crucial step in achieving not only state, but more importantly, federal recognition of Afro-Mexicans. In addition, even though they were denied being counted as a separate ethnic group on the 2010 census by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography, they continue to fight to be recognized as a specific ethnicity. And, this recognition will afford them all the constitutional rights and support that is given to the accredited, counted, and officially recognized Indigenous groups. The voices and activism of the Afro-Mexican communities in the Costa Chica continue

to rescue, archive, disseminate and promote their knowledge and cultural traditions, and to fight for a greater visibility that matches the extensive contributions that they have made throughout Mexican history.

In conjunction with these projects and spaces of social activism and cultural dissemination, the cultural production that has been created in and circulated throughout this region, also reflects and resonates this rich history of place and vocalizes a deep-rooted sense of connection between Afro-Mexicans and the landscape of the Costa Chica. More specifically, this articulation of a place-based consciousness is commonly articulated in the abundant music, verse, and poetry that has been produced by Afro-Mexicans in the region. For example, in the anthology *Ébano. Versos costeños y poesía regional afro-mestiza*, the author and editor Israel Reyes Larrea includes numerous pieces that demonstrate:

*la fuerza de la voz que de generación en generación ha permanecido entre las comunidades afrodescendientes de la costa chica* (the strength of voice that has remained in the Afro-descendent communities of the Costa Chica from generation to generation) (9).

Moreover, these *versos* and poems also serve as the “*clave de nuestra identidad cultural* (the key to our cultural identity),” a means with which to communicate and disseminate the oral traditions, oral testimonies, and “*forma de ver el mundo* (way of seeing the world)” (9, 12). This text presents a varied compilation and anthology of poems and verse that capture social themes and content related to everyday life and relationships in the communities of the Costa Chica. For example, in a section of an untitled *verso costeño*, the anonymous author recounts events and aspects of commonplace life:

<i>Si yo hubiera estudiado y hubiera sido un marinero, en la carestía que estamos no nos alcanza el dinero.</i>	(If I would have studied and I would have been a sailor, in the poverty that we are we don't have enough money.
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<i>Cerro Blanco y Paso del Jote son dos cuadrillas vecinas, en las casas de salud no hay doctor ni medicinas, este verso lo compuse cuando el huracán Paulina.</i>	Cerro Blanco and Paso del Jote are two neighboring towns, in the health clinic there is no doctor nor medicines, I composed this verse during Hurricane Paulina.
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<i>Desde el tiempo que vengo yo tenía una buena perra, de tantos partidos que hay esto se va a volver guerra.</i>	From a long time ago I had a good bitch, with there being so many matches this is going to turn into war.
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<i>Yo me encontré una paloma, echadita en su nido, nosotros los mexicanos estamos rete vendidos,</i>	I found myself a dove lying in its nest, we Mexicans are really sold out,
--	--

*la nación que nos compró*      the nation that bought us  
*fue los Estados Unidos*      was the United States  
*pal' tiempo que ahorita vamos,* in the future that we are headed for  
*vamos a estar rete jodidos*      we will be really screwed.) (29)

As we note in this *verso*, the different stanzas reference local towns (Cerro Blanco and Paso del Jote), particular events, such as hurricane Paulina, and daily circumstances in the region, such as poverty, the state of social infrastructure (health clinics without doctors and medicines), and the imperial “purchasing” power of the United States. And, while these thematic items do present an articulation of regional occurrences, they also link to the experiences of Mexicans throughout the nation, thus forging local and national connections and articulations of place-making. Furthermore, these intersections of the local and the national within the relationship between identity and place are what Gupta and Ferguson theorize as a mode of “rethinking difference through connection” (“Beyond Culture” 8). That is, “locally lived lives” are interconnected to broader (regional, national or even global) spaces through experience (Gupta and Ferguson 11). In this work, they are the experiences of poverty, imperialism, natural phenomena and challenges of infrastructure that de-link the Afro-Mexican experience from a framework that is essentially foreign, and

rather connect it to other spatial identity formations that also engage these experiences.

Another poem in the anthology, *Costa*, by Efraín Villegas Zapata, presents additional vocalizations regarding the region and the cultural traditions that circulate throughout it. One section of the poem reads as follows:

*En Corralero pescado  
los tres comimos frugal,  
le dimos vuelta al ganado  
y nos fuimos a El Tamal.*

(In Corralero seafood  
The three of us ate light,  
We checked over the  
livestock  
And we went to El Tamal.

*Se puso luego un fandango  
un violin y un bajo quinto,  
cantaba el negro más pinto  
una chilena de rango,  
yo la zapatié en un pango  
y hasta cimbraba el recinto*

Later they played a fandango  
a violin and a fifth-bass,  
the darkest black was singing  
a *chilena* with vocal range,  
I tapped it on a *pango*  
and the whole joint was even  
shaking.

*Sobre la artesa se empeña  
la negrada con amor,  
en darle gusto y sabor  
a la chilena costeña.*

Upon the *artesa* with effort  
the black folk [danced] with  
love,  
giving gusto and flavor  
to the coastal *chilena*.) (53)

In these stanzas of the poem, we again note several references to specific places in the region (Corralero, El Tamal), and furthermore, the author also alludes to several cultural traditions, expressions, and

artifacts that are very particular to the Afro-Mexican communities in the Costa Chica. For example, the author speaks of musical rhythms and genres that are very specific to the region: *fandangos* (a musical rhythm and dance) and *chilenas* (a form of poetic verse that originated from Chilean musicians and migrants who passed through the area on route to California during the era of the Gold Rush). Moreover, the poem names specific instruments such as the *artesa* (a type of wooden box) and the *pango* (a zither-like instrument that is also common in Tanzania). And we also observe how the local Afro-Mexicans or “*la negrada* (black folk)” passionately and energetically participate in these musical scenes. As such, I suggest that the specific content and references in this poem very poignantly situate expressions of Afro-Mexican culture in this region. That is, through its content, this poem is an articulation of the intersections of identity and place, as well as a place-making tool through which cultural expression is localized, and inherently and intimately linked to and mapped within the landscape of the Costa Chica.

### ***3.2 Understanding Cimarronaje Cultural as a Counter-Cartography of Blackness and as a Place-Making Narrative***

If we examine additional sites and spaces of contemporary Afro-Mexican cultural production in the Costa Chica, we continue to be able to delineate further articulations of place-making and, of equal significance, alternative constructions of identity and consciousness, which I argue, not only extend the position of cultural production as political, but also as decolonial in function and form. That is, as theorized by Walter Mignolo, these sites and spaces of cultural production offer a “de-linking” from the logic of modernity/coloniality and instead pronounce and foreground “other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics” (“Delinking” 453).

In this section, I present a close “reading” of three spaces and items of contemporary Afro-Mexican cultural production that engage a political and decolonial function. That is, they offer alternative ways of seeing, knowing, and representing Afro-Mexican history, memory,

cosmology, identity, and consciousness. Moreover, I place particular attention to the invocation, reification, and re-construction of *cimarronaje*, the maroon narrative, in these sites and spaces of cultural production.

The maroon narrative has long been a central literary trope and historical marker used to delineate European and non-European imaginaries and boundaries of space, place, being, and belonging. For example, colonial literature and travel accounts employed this narrative in order to characterize the separate boundaries between the tempest tossed encounters of European explorers with other primitive and exotic peoples and lands. It was the European maroon, once shipwrecked and displaced to unknown spaces, who would arise as a hero and civilize and subjugate barbaric peoples and foreign lands.

Later, the narrative was employed by Europeans as a signifier of the untamed and unruly, escaped slave: the maroon who had fled to hidden spaces and defied the "civilizing" missions of their master. Here again, geographic displacement, now linked to the rebellious, non-European other, served to segregate the spatial and ontological



boundaries between the European and non-European. Through a postcolonial lens, historians and literary theorists have critiqued the binaries forged by these two maroon narratives, both of which were produced by Europeans. That is, whether they have been used to exalt the lost explorer, or criminalize and isolate the escaped slave, scholars have understood these European-produced, maroon narratives as tools of colonial epistemic and ontological expansion over non-European others, who in turn became place-less in their assigned and allotted space of existence.

More recently, however, twentieth-century authors and scholars have re-appropriated this narrative as a marker of resistance and survival, especially when produced by non-European entities (James 2). For example, often employed by non-European artists, intellectuals, and authors in the Caribbean, this narrative has transformed the isolated and criminalized maroon into a figure whose flight and displacement have become symbolic of warriorhood, endurance, and a search for self-determination. That is, this alternative maroon narrative has become a signifier of “resilience, survival, resourcefulness, and innovation” (James 8). And, as a result,

it is a narrative that has served as a tool with which to re-map the boundaries of identity, imbuing a sense of place to constructions of knowledge and being that have often been dis-placed and framed as place-less.

It is within this framework of maroonage or *cimarronaje* as a counter-cartography of place, of knowledge, and of being, that I examine contemporary cultural production in Afro-Mexican communities. Specifically, I explore how the areas of visual arts and radio engage the maroon narrative as a “cultural-becoming-political” strategy of location and representation, hence a counter-cartography of place and being. Following the anti-communist revolutions in Central and Eastern Europe during the early 1990’s, Jacques Derrida envisioned counter-cartographies of Europe, or decolonial transformations or reshapings of the borders of Europe. He called for the possibility of new “spiritual geographies” that would result in a Europe heading in new directions accompanied by changing goals. In this paper I extend this notion of counter-cartographies or decolonial transformations to Mexico in order to understand how cultural projects contest dominant and hegemonic boundaries of identity, belonging,

representation, and knowledge production and dissemination. Furthermore, I apply the Derridian concept of counter-cartography to Afro-Mexican projects that are attempting to articulate, contest and re-draw hybrid networks of identity formation and representation.

More specifically, I examine projects that envision and incorporate this notion of counter-cartography through a contemporary, alternative maroon narrative: *cimarronaje cultural* or cultural maroonage. Defined by Cynthia James as an “artistic mission of resistance,” this narrative stakes its distinction on “writing against the grain of the European tradition and depiction [of identity]” (9). While James applies this to Caribbean creations of cultural maroonage, here I apply a similar notion to Afro-Mexican-produced projects that not only speak against hegemonic constructions and representations of Mexicans of African descent, but also, specifically envision counter-cartographies of the relationship between blackness and *mexicanidad*.

As discussed in previous chapters, the relationship between blackness and *mexicanidad* has often been framed as one in “uneasy tension” (Vaughn 49), and it is a relationship in which blackness has

often been historically and culturally marooned elsewhere, beyond the geo- and bio-graphic borders of *mexicanidad*. However, through the projects analyzed in this section, we are able to understand and theorize how the discourse of *cimarronaje cultural* is being deployed as a local, national, and global place-making narrative and cartographic tool that serves as a decolonial project of knowledge and being, and as strategy of re-existence, relocation, resilience, and innovation.

### **3.3 *Cimarronaje Cultural: Towards a Counter-Cartography of Blackness***

#### **3.3.1 *El Centro Cultural Cimarrón***

The first cultural text or site that I will discuss is the mural painting by artists from the *Centro Cultural Cimarrón*, an artist collective established in 1995 that originally fostered and was focused on youth-based artistic production in El Ciruelo, Oaxaca, and now extends its projects throughout the region. The *Centro Cultural Cimarrón* was initially envisioned as a constructive and artistic space for students to congregate during the summer vacations. Today, it functions as umbrella organization for art workshops and programs that engage youth throughout the Costa Chica, and supports spaces of artistic expressions and aesthetic forms such a painting, engravings,

ceramics, sculpture, story-telling, and occasionally music and dance (*Centro Cultural Cimarrón*). More importantly, as described by one of its founders, Padre Glyn Jemmott, it is a positive space in which the youth can employ visual arts as a means to reflect upon what it means to be “*negro*, where they can look at themselves through their own eyes,” where their visibility, their memories, their being are not denied, disappeared, and always spoken for by other dominant forms of knowledge and representation. This perspective towards the role of artistic expression as a place of reflection and as a space of visibility is echoed in the Centro’s slogan: “*Aprender para ser libres* (learning in order to be free).” That is, this space of artistic creation results in a freedom to see and make visible all that is encompassed in Afro-Mexican identity, social life, history, memory, and culture. It is a freedom that is manifested in an artistic space and that is facilitated through the learning about and dissemination of all of these facets of Afro-Mexican consciousness and existence. As the group’s self-description states:

*Aprendemos a ver de manera diferente. A vernos y a los demás con nuestros propios ojos. Y aceptarnos, aceptar el color de nuestra piel, y todo lo que encierra, como nuestro, inicio y base de todo quehacer artístico, de la existencia misma* (we learn to see in a different way. To see ourselves and others with our own

eyes. And to accept ourselves, to accept the color of our skin, and all that it encapsulates, as our own, as a foundation and base of every artistic task, of existence itself) (*Centro Cultural Cimarrón*)

Exhibitions of the art created by students involved in the *Centro Cultural Cimarrón* have had great success touring around Mexico, particularly in Oaxaca and recently in Mexico City, and around the globe, such as in Japan and in various cities in the United States, including Los Angeles and New Mexico.

Here, I present an analysis of a recent mural painting created by members of the *Centro Cultural Cimarrón* for the 11<sup>th</sup> *Encuentro de los Pueblos Negros* in Juchitán, Guerrero, in March of 2007. In reading this mural as a cultural text, I illustrate how their artistic expressions are reflecting a critical consciousness towards Afro-Mexican being, and drawing a counter-cartography of blackness itself. I use the term “critical consciousness” to reference a shift in conception and perception of being, which results from persons looking at themselves through their own eyes, a rupture from “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (Du Bois 5).

Figures 1-3 represent different sections and close-ups of the mural painting of this *Encuentro*. If we read this wall painting as a text, analyzing the content and aesthetics of the work, we see depictions of the terrain, every-day activities practiced within it (particularly fishing and coastal-related activities), objects related to local traditions (the masked man representative of the *danza de los diablos* [the dance of the devils]), and animals that hold symbolic relevance to daily life and to cultural traditions, rituals, and spirituality. One of the groups most celebrated members, Santa Obdulia “Yuye” Hernández Nicolás, explains:

*Me gusta pintar sobre la cultura negra, sobre cómo vivimos, cómo trabajamos, cómo amamos y sobre la naturaleza que nos rodea* (I like to paint about black culture, about how we live, how we work, how we love and about the nature that surrounds us). (*Centro Cultural Cimarrón*)

In Figure 3, for example, we see the representation of a highly significant concept that is a part of Afro-Mexican culture and philosophy towards nature: *el tono/tonal*. The image of a wolf-like, animal head on top of a human’s head reflects this concept that is widely disseminated and practiced throughout these Afro-Mexican communities. *El tono/tonal*, which, in conjunction with the body and

soul, is believed to be a fundamental part of the existence of each human being. It is a philosophical notion that establishes a spiritual connection between each individual and a specific animal that has been assigned to the person from birth. As such, it delineates the interconnected relationship between a human and an animal that binds them both in a common destiny (Aguirre Beltrán, *Cuijla* 177). In fact, this spiritual bind is so integral to a person's existence that, it is said, when a person's *tono* (assigned animal) gets sick or dies, the person does as well, and vice versa. While no parallel concept of the *tono/tonal* exists in Western cosmology, it has been articulated and connected to several Amerindian cultures, which use the term "*nagual*" to reference this human-animal connection (Brinton 4).

In thinking about the role of this concept and its selected inclusion in this particular mural painting, I propose that it illuminates an-other, alternative vision of the body politic: a different perspective towards the (human) body in Afro-Mexican epistemology, culture, and philosophy. In this illustration I suggest that we are able to visualize how the body represents a unique spiritual bind between human and animal, which further reflects a decolonial and eco-spiritual



connection, awareness of, and responsibility to one's natural surroundings. That is, this image *embodies* and makes visible a relationship of symbiotic and mutual recognition; the human does not dominate nature, but is integrated in and invested in a relationship that is predicated on symmetry and a level power of recognition and existence: both animal and human require the mutual recognition of each other in order to survive. Furthermore, I suggest that this representation also makes visible an ecological and environmental consciousness within these communities, in which one's care for and protection of one's *tonal* will not only benefit one's natural surroundings, but will also benefit a person's own destiny and quality of life. As such, the inclusion of images of the *tono/tonal* in this mural makes visible an important Afro-Mexican philosophy that, in this aesthetic context, also physically and symbolically *embodies* a "spiritual act" that generates and reinforces the creation and consciousness of other "ecological communities" (between human and animal) that are forged upon equilibrium and mutual recognition ("Decolonial Food for Thought").

In addition, if we examine another significant image in this mural, the repeated portrayal of eyes, we are able to observe another space in which the body becomes an important site of reference that also engages and makes visible an interface of mutual recognition. In all three figures, especially figure 3, we see the inclusion of many eyes. During interviews with several of the mural's creators, including Santa Obdulia Hernández Nicolás, Alberta "Beti" Hernández Nicolás, and Baltazar Catellano Melo, they expressed that the eyes hold a dual-function: first, they represent the own eyes of these artists, looking at themselves, their community, their culture, their memories, and their history. Second, they also represent the eyes of people beyond the borders of their communities, eyes looking in, noting their presence, their being, and their belonging. In this respect, these "eyes" function as sites that produce and promote an interconnected relationship between those looking in and those looking out. That is, these eyes create, visualize, and make visible a space of shared reflection and mutual recognition. I argue that this representation, conceptualization, and symbolism of eyes looking in and eyes looking out also resonates a decolonial vision, in which all those who are involved in and connected to this experience and space of reflection are equally and

mutually recognized. That is, the inclusion of these images establishes what Gupta and Ferguson call a “re-thinking [of] difference through connection,” as those on the inside and those on the outside are looking at each other, engaging difference through and from a starting point of a common experience of reflection and mutual recognition (“Beyond Culture” 8). It is not the vision of connection that the homogenizing, modern State has inculcated in Mexico (as we have seen in previous chapters that explore the dominant iterations of *mestizaje* and “Golden Age” cultural production), which envision the “body politic” as a coherent, and connected unit that is achieved through processes and narratives that “represses these differences” (Nelson, *A Finger in the Wound* 2).

Furthermore, I also suggest that the repeated inclusion of “eyes” and the narratives that they represent are emblematic of the *Centro*’s namesake figure, the *cimarrón*, and a re-constructed, alternative discourse of *cimarronaje*. I propose that these “eyes” reflect a reconfiguration and reification of Afro-Mexican identity and consciousness as “*una búsqueda*,” a looking and searching--for visibility, for un-hidden access, and for visualized and recognized

existence (from within and from the outside). That is, I propose that they are eyes in search of a visible subjectivity and consciousness that rebel against silencing, disappearance and dis-placement of Afro-Mexican culture, history, memory, ontology and epistemology. When interviewed for a newspaper article about a recent exhibition in Cuernavaca, one of the collectives most active and renowned artists, Baltazar Castellano Melo, describes the collective's vision of its namesake figure, the *cimarrón*:

*Nos llamamos así porque en la historia habíamos sido siempre dominados y nos empezamos a rebelar...Nosotros siempre hemos existido, aunque no somos visibles...Por eso nos estamos rebelando, porque existimos y somos parte de México; ahí estamos con nuestras costumbres y tradiciones* (We call ourselves this because throughout history we had always been dominated and we began to rebel...We have always existed, even though we are not visible...Therefore we are rebelling, because we exist and we are a part of Mexico; Here we are with our customs and traditions). (Sifuentes Cañas)

As such, I argue that the discourse of *cimarronaje* as represented, employed and articulated in this site of cultural production and by these artists, envisions rebellion as a means of visibility (they are not the invisible, criminalized *cimarrón* communities

that remained hidden as was the case in the colonial era<sup>20</sup>). Moreover, it is also a search for and visualization of freedom through the mutual recognition of blackness in *mexicanidad* and *mexicanidad* in blackness; through the eyes looking inwards while also looking outwards toward a decolonial mapping of being and belonging in contemporary Mexico.

And, in a political move, they are eyes in search of improved access to resources and opportunities, for future, for (official and unofficial) recognition, and for space and place in which to continue to

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<sup>20</sup> This counter-narrative of *cimarronaje* is also different from an officially documented, *cimarrón* history in Mexico, that of Yanga . Gaspar Yanga (the namesake for the current town of Yanga, San Lorenzo de los Negros in Veracruz) was the leader of a *cimarrón* community established in the mountainous region of Veracruz, Mexico, around 1570. Due to consistent robberies by this maroon community of Spanish caravans that were bringing goods to the interior of the country, and on which the maroon community survived, an armed confrontation between this community and Spanish troops took place in 1609, resulting in casualties on both sides of the conflict. Yanga subsequently sent terms of a peace accord to Spanish vice-regal representatives: he would guarantee an end to the armed conflict and the cessation of captures of Spanish caravans in exchange for the community receiving autonomy. Some have this said that this accord, which was eventually granted by the Spanish viceroyalty, represents the first, successful form of independence in the region. However, despite its significance, the history of Yanga is invisible within the broader history of Mexico. For example, school textbooks do not even make reference to this act of *cimarronaje*, which lead to the negotiation of the first free town in Mexico.

articulate their own configuration of subjectivity and consciousness, “*lo propio.*”

### **3.3.2 Naufragio and the work of Aydée Rodríguez Lopez**

These notions of mutual recognition, critical consciousness, and visualizing subjectivity or making subjectivity visible are also present in a second site of cultural production, that of the work by Aydée Rodríguez Lopez. A self-taught painter in Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero who grew up in the Costa Chica of Guerrero, Rodríguez Lopez describes her work, which represents Afro-Mexican people, culture, memory, and traditions, as “*temas [que] surgen de la sangre* (expressions [that] come from the blood.”<sup>21</sup> Her work has been displayed throughout the region, at the *Museo Nacional de Antropología* in Mexico City, and at various locations in the United States, including at the exhibition entitled “The African Presence in México” at the National Museum of Mexican Art in Chicago and “Pathways to Freedom in the Americas” at

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<sup>21</sup> Quotations from the artist come from interviews conducted in period ranging from 2006 to 2010.

the Charles H. Wright Museum of African-American History in Detroit, Michigan.

Similar to the *versos*, poetry, and mural that are previously discussed in this chapter, several of Rodriguez Lopez's pieces also depict daily life and Afro-Mexican traditions and cosmologies that circulate throughout the Costa Chica. For example, her work portrays images and themes that range from cultural manifestations such *danzas* (dances), to representations of *el tono/tonal*. And similar to the aforementioned sites of cultural production, this artist's work also functions as an "archival memory" (Taylor 19), which maps, articulates, and makes visible components of contemporary Afro-Mexican identity, experiences, and traditions.

If we turn our attention to a particular piece entitled *Naufragio* (Shipwreck), which is displayed in figures 4-6, we are able to examine a work that represents an oral testimony that continues to be widely circulated within the Costa Chica, especially among the older generations in the area. The testimony recounts a shipwreck that was carrying African slaves. Upon crashing near the shore, it is said that

the slaves escaped from bondage and lived freely in this Pacific coastal region. No official, archival documentation of the shipwreck has been found in Spanish chronicles or in the Archivo General de la Nación in Mexico City; however, a collective testimony from individuals throughout the Costa Chica speak of a ship owned by a Spanish woman, carrying human and material cargo, which crashed on the coast near Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero. In his ethnographic study *Cuijla*, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán does include a reference to testimonials about a shipwreck of the boat *Puerta de Oro* that echoes this collective memory of a ship owned by a Spanish woman and that can still sometimes be seen during low tide in an area just beyond the shores (27). As this collective testimony recounts, Afro-descendent and *afromestizo* communities in the area are said to link back to the slaves that escaped from the shipwreck.

Again, while Spanish chronicles and Mexican government archives have not provided any documentation that recounts this shipwreck, the narration of this particular, collective memory and history has been and continues to be important to the subjectivity and to the experience of Afro-Mexicans in the region today. If we



understand this collective testimony to be an “archival memory” (Taylor 19), then I suggest that this painting functions as an artistic framework that enables the practice, visibility, and dissemination of memory and of knowledge production. That is, this piece represents ***an-other*** archive, ***an-other*** history, ***an-other*** communication of knowledge and being that is an important foundation in the articulation of Afro-Mexican consciousness and identity today. Furthermore, this painting of the *Naufragio* is also one that employs a discourse of *cimarronaje*, albeit an indirect discourse, different from the named *Centro Cultural Cimarrón*. Here the escaped slave, the *cimarrón* or maroon, is envisioned and represented as part creator of a present and future community. That is, this community and its ancestors are the *pueblos del cimarronaje* (maroon communities) who were born from and continue to be marked by this collective testimony. More importantly, this other-memory and other-history of *cimarronaje* as displayed in the painting do not envision maroon communities as criminal entities that were hidden until *granted* liberty by a post-independent nation-state. Rather, I propose that this narrative envisions an empowered and embodied liberty created by the self, *una búsqueda propia* (one’s own search) or a “*busqueda de ‘lo*

*propio`* (a search for one's self)." As depicted in figure 6, which is a close-up of the work *Naufragio*, both a Spanish sailor and a free slave hold whips in their hands. I argue that this symbolic gesture illuminates a narrative of dual self-empowerment, in which both figures are engaged with equal power in a moment of interconnection, and are both also symbolically contributing to the foundation of these Mexican communities in the Costa Chica region. Furthermore, both the European and the African are struggling for place in this scene. And, as such, this work of Rodriguez Lopez brings an oral testimony and collective memory to the foreground of identity formation and articulation by making visible an alternative memory and an alternative archive of the presence and history of Afro-Mexicans in this particular region.

I suggest that the thematic narrative of *cimarronaje* that is made visible in this painting recovers marooned, displaced, and disappeared voices, histories, memories, and subjectivities. And in turn, these *pueblos de cimarronaje* and Afro-descendants who are represented in the painting are transformed into "catalysts of rebirth" (James 77), forging new cartographies of place and being within the borderlands of

this region, and also within the nation and the construction of *mexicanidad* as well.

### **3.3.3 Cimarrón: La Voz de los Afromestizos**

A final cultural text that I wish to discuss is a radio program entitled *Cimarrón: La voz de los afromestizos*. This program originally began in 1996 and was re-initiated in 2006 under the direction of a few individuals including Professor Israel Reyes Larrea from José Maria Morelos, Oaxaca. The half-hour long program currently circulates weekly in numerous communities in the Costa Chica region of both Oaxaca and Guerrero. The content of the program includes local musical productions, poetry, verse, and stories associated with Afro-Mexican cultural traditions and dances. It also presents interviews and discussion forums with community members and those involved with these communities on issues related to community events, politics, economics, and culture. More importantly, as described by Professor Larrea, the program functions not only to circulate awareness about the history, cultural productions, contributions, and expressions in the

region, but also to strengthen the cultural identity of the communities themselves.<sup>22</sup> More significantly, he does not envision this radio program as one that *rescues* culture, but rather as a medium with which to “*compartir experiencias* (share experiences)” and, in doing so, elevate the status of this culture within the community and beyond. This objective is clarified in the first broadcast in August of 1996, in which the program’s hosts discuss the “*quehacer cultural de nuestros pueblos* (the cultural task of our communities):”

*Promover y difundir nuestras tradiciones y costumbres para que los pueblos negros de esta región cuenten con un espacio y que, además, hagan suyo este espacio, en el cual puedan dar a conocer la vida cotidiana y cultural de cada uno de los pueblos, contar con una plataforma que les brinda la oportunidad de decir, de sus propias voces, quiénes son, qué hacen, su historia, sus formas propias de ver el mundo, las relaciones interétnicas...que les dan significatividad a la vida cultural (promote and disseminate our traditions and customs so that the black communities of this region can count on a space and, more so, make this space their own, in which they can get to know the every day life and culture of each one of these communities, to count on a platform that provides the opportunity to tell, with their own voices, who they are, what they do, their history, their own forms of viewing the world, the inter-ethnic relations...that give significance to their cultural life).(Cimarrón: La voz de los afroestizos)*

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<sup>22</sup> Information about the goals and content of this radio program come from interviews that I conducted in José María Morelos with Prof. Israel Reyes Larrea in 2006.

In noting and listening to this statement, we can hear the articulation of a unique and important perspective towards cultural production as a space that is one's own and in which to get to know, celebrate, represent, and disseminate one's own or "*lo propio*."

Moreover, I propose that, in appropriating the discourse of *cimarronaje* (as echoed in the title *Cimarrón: La voz de los afro mestizos*), this radio program, its creators, its participants, and even its audience, are consistently looking for (*en búsqueda de*) broader networks and spaces of identification, which are fed by artistic, musical, poetic, social, and historical narratives and expressions that are produced by and circulate within these communities. In addition, I suggest that, in its aesthetic form as a radio program, this "traveling" project, whose composition and programming circulate throughout numerous cities, towns, and villages throughout the Costa Chica region, further engage the concept of *cimarronaje* as one of movement beyond limiting and limited borders of space, place, and being. That is, in contrast to the traditional, colonial maroon narrative that describes and inscribes the escaped slave within borders framed by isolation, alienation, and invisibility,

here we see a counter-narrative of maroonage and migration. In this case the circulation of this program, its content, participants, and audience, demonstrate a maroon narrative of movement within and beyond multiple spatial and identity borders and networks of identification. That is, it is a mobile framework that, similar to the function of the work of Aydée Rodríguez Lopez, enables the practice and diffusion of cultural and social memory and expressions. And I suggest, in serving as an-other archive of knowledge and being, it is a program that moves from “one surrogate home to another” (James, 14), re-defining borders as intercultural and inclusive spaces of being and belonging.

#### **4.1 Conclusions: Cimarronaje as a Decolonial Project**

I have chosen to discuss these three, specific cultural texts precisely because they engage the discourse of *cimarronaje*, whether directly by name, such as the *Centro Cultural Cimarrón* and the radio program *Cimarrón: La voz de los afromestizos*, or indirectly such as

the painting *Naufragio* by Aydée Rodríguez López. It is ironic that, while traditional, colonial narratives of *cimarronaje* or maroonage have been linked to criminal escapism (the escaped, hidden fugitive maroon) or isolated displacement (to be marooned), these three sites of cultural production theorize, appropriate, and employ an alternative narrative and articulation of *cimarronaje*. I suggest that they employ the discourse of *cimarronaje cultural* as a decolonial project and as counter cartography of *afromexicanidad* (Afro-Mexican-ness) and the relationship between blackness and *mexicanidad* (Mexican-ness).

First, this counter-cartography is illustrated in the narratives and signifiers of rootedness and place-ness that are present in all three cultural texts. Via depictions of the land, the customs lived in it, the people who are a part of it, or the intellectual, cultural, and historical memories and expressions that circulate throughout the region, all of these pieces utilize the figure of the *cimarrón* or the discourse of *cimarronaje* as one that inherently links or ties the Afro-Mexican presence, their traditions, their history, their culture, their memories, and their knowledge and being to the land. They are not only present, but more so, they are a part of the land in every way (an idea that

also resonates in the notion of *el tono/tonal*). Here, in these sites of cultural production, I argue that *tierra* (land) is visible, tangible, and concrete. And as such, blackness and *afromexicanidad* are not evasive, lost, hidden, or dislocated to an anachronistic, primitive space, imprisoned within Mexico's colonial past (as described in chapters 1 and 2). Nor is it displaced beyond the borders of Mexico, only to be located in Cuba (as described in chapter 2). On the contrary, *cimarronaje* functions as a symbol of rootedness and serves as a place-making narrative.

Moreover, the discourse of *cimarronaje* is also converted into a symbol of warriorhood, resourcefulness, resilience, re-existence, and intercultural encounter (we see this in the work of Aydée Rodríguez López and in the radio program). In this sense, *cimarronaje*, as manifested in these sites and symbols, is a rebellion against invisibility and dis-placement. Furthermore, I propose that it is an articulation of *cimarronaje cultural* that produces a bio-political and geo-political counter-cartography of *mexicanidad* in which Afro-Mexicans place themselves within the borders of the local, regional, and national constructions of imagined community, in which they are represented



and recognized as heroic, inventive, and active members of the population.

Second, *cimarronaje*, while rooted, simultaneously envisions a searching for (*una búsqueda de*) an existence or better yet, a re-existence and re-location of a network of identity formations and experiences that is not shackled to the modern/colonial yoke that has tied certain ethno-racial communities to economic, social, and political limitation and invisibility. Instead, I propose that these texts engage *cimarronaje* as a discourse that seeks something better, something else, *otro mundo posible* (another possible world). As such, this alternative narrative of *cimarronaje* is not only about resistance, but it also constitutes re-existence, as Walter Mignolo would suggest. That is, this is a narrative in which consciousness and subjectivity are made visible, re-located, and re-mapped as a counter-cartography of knowledge, place, space, and being.

Finally, I suggest that this theorization of *cimarronaje cultural* as a counter-cartography and as an alternative articulation of the maroon narrative, is one that departs from traditional, colonial maroon

narratives, which, in this sense, also presents a decolonial transformation and contestation of dominant, hegemonic geo-politics and bio-politics that have dis-placed Afro-Mexicans from spaces of knowledge production and made them invisible and de-linked from codes and configurations of identity and belonging. That is, the cultural texts presented in this chapter serve as decolonial projects that are speaking and writing against the logic of coloniality and against the conditions and representations of displacement, alienation, and invisibility that have marked their identity and the traditional, colonial maroon. As a result, I suggest that these projects and their engagement with the narrative of *cimarronaje cultural* are tools of counter-cartography that envision alternative, hybrid, and mobile archives of knowledge production and networks of identification and representation. Furthermore, via the production, articulation, and incorporation of strategies of localization or place-making, these projects also decolonize the relationship between the production of knowledge and culture that are connected to race, space, and place. More specifically, it allows us to interrogate local and national (and perhaps regional and global) relationships between the geo-politics and bio-politics of being and belonging, particularly in Mexico.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Towards a Re-mapping of Blackness and Belonging in Mexico

*Llegaremos en América, antes que en parte alguna del globo,  
a la creación de una raza hecha con el tesoro de todas las  
anteriores, a la raza final, la raza cósmica.*

-José Vasconcelos

*¿Cuál es mi cultura, mi raza, mi destino?*

-Manuel Zapata Olivella

The positivistic, Vasconcelian theorization of *mestizaje* has been framed and utilized as a strategic tool that the post-Revolutionary, Mexican State could employ to map a trajectory of unification and modernization. In its conception, *mestizaje* engaged the “romanticism of modernity [which conceived] heterogeneity [as] a celebrated virtue” (Goldberg 10). For Vasconcelos, *mestizaje* and the cosmic construction of the *mestizo* nation was an act to be celebrated and emulated in how it allowed the State to facilitate a successful management of its own, internal heterogeneity. Moreover, it was a tool that would enable Mexico to de-link itself from its image as a dark legend, thus serving as a “fitting response to [the region’s] pernicious

racist past" (Goldberg 16). According to Vasconcelos, this was a past that was still being materialized in other, global spaces, such as in the United States, which, according to this Mexican author, could not deconstruct the "*línea inflexible*" (the inflexible line---the color line) that continued to divide the black from the white (not to mention also the exclusion of other populations such as those of Japanese and Chinese descent) (16). For Vasconcelos, the invention of the *mestizo* nation would account for a history of cultural and ethno-racial hybridity, while also navigating itself towards an ethno-racial endpoint in which all of the "treasures" of these different parts would be transformed into a cosmic, homogeneous whole through amalgamation and absorption.

However, as I have delineated in previous chapters, this romanticized view of *mestizaje* and the desire of the modern, Mexican, *mestizo* nation to invent and image itself as a "coherent and discrete entity," has been predicated on the "creation and promotion of difference" (Goldberg 31). And it was the (re)production of racialized difference that justified the need to modernize and homogenize its internal Others. As a result, I have proposed that in the time period

following Revolution, modern Mexico operated as a racial state,<sup>1</sup> in which the destiny of Mexicans of African descent was already mapped for them. That is, within this dominant discourse of *mestizaje*, in which blackness has been whitened and faded into brown, Afro-Mexicans have been destined to a condition of invisibility, silence, and displacement beyond the borders of *mexicanidad*.

Yet, as I have demonstrated in chapter three, contemporary articulations of a critical consciousness and a place-based consciousness within Afro-Mexican communities in the Costa Chica, are being expressed and employed as a rebellion against this imposed destiny. These communities, especially in the sphere of cultural production where the cultural also becomes political, have been creating and pursuing projects that envision a decolonization of being and belonging in Mexico. That is, Afro-Mexican cultural production has been functioning as an act of rebellion, of *cimarronaje cultural*, and of

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<sup>1</sup> Here I use David Theo Goldberg's definition of the racial state as racial because of uneven power structures that are instrumental in "producing and reproducing, constituting and effecting racially shaped spaces, places, and groups and events, life worlds and possibilities, accesses and restrictions, inclusions and exclusions, conceptions and modes of representation" (104).

“epistemic disobedience,”<sup>2</sup> with which to (re)produce, reflect upon, and represent other ways of seeing and knowing who they are (“*lo propio*”), and how they imagine their relationship with *mexicanidad*. In turn, I have suggested that the individuals and collectives within these Afro-Mexican communities in the Costa Chica are decolonizing their subjectivity, by being their own agents who serve as active and present participants in this counter-cartography of being and belonging.

Now, in returning to the opening citations of this chapter, we can see how this notion of an articulation of critical consciousness that foregrounds agency and self-produced subjectivity is embodied in the citation by the Afro-Colombian author Manuel Zapata Olivella. This opening remark, which begins his influential manifesto *¡Levántate mulato!*, does not envision the destiny of blacks in the Americas as already being constructed and completed. Instead, he poignantly interrogates the already-spoken-for (and silenced) destiny of

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<sup>2</sup> Walter D. Mignolo defines “epistemic disobedience” as a “de-linking from the magic of the Western idea of modernity, ideals of humanity and promises of economic growth and financial prosperity” (“Epistemic Disobedience” 3).

blackness in the dominant construction of *mestizaje*, and he pronounces his own inquiry into his own identity, culture, and destiny: *¿cuál es **mi** cultura, **mi** raza, **mi** destino?* That is, Zapata Olivella does not follow the Vasconcelian map of identity as a single, fixed construct and as a final end point to which all the “treasures” of the previous, essentialized identities shall arrive. On the contrary, Zapata Olivella turns this vision inside out and upside-down via questioning the politics of identity itself. His interrogations challenge the notion of a static, already completed, single, fixed identity, and in contrast, present the possibility of a permeable formation of consciousness, of (co)existence, and of being that are in constant motion and evolution. As such, I suggest that this interrogation of his own race, his own culture, his own being, and his own destiny, presents a re-thinking of *identity in politics*, and is unlike Vasconcelos’ thinking about *identity politics*, where “the former is open to whoever wants to join, while the latter tends to be bounded by the definition of a given identity” (Mignolo, “Epistemic Disobedience” 14).

This act of questioning identity in politics, and in getting-to-know one’s own subjectivity and in conceiving identity as an unbounded,

always in motion, and dynamic construct is a similar move to what is being practiced and performed in particular social, cultural, and political projects in Afro-Mexican communities in the Costa Chica. In this chapter I discuss projects and programs such as the *Encuentro de los Pueblos Negros* (Meeting of the Black Communities) in Oaxaca and Guerrero, and the association *México Negro, A.C.*, in order to illustrate how community-based projects contribute to a re-configuration and re-mapping of identity as a dynamic network and pluri-versal construction. In addition, I also present an analysis of ethno-racial terminology and cultural identifiers that are circulating within these communities and are further echoing this construction of identity as a pluri-versal network that foregrounds experience as a mode of establishing markers and spaces of identification. In turn, I offer a re-mapping and re-thinking of blackness and belonging in Mexico.



#### **4.1 México Negro and the Encuentro de los Pueblos Negros: From Pluri-versal Networks to Social and Political Action**

The lived experiences of invisibility, exclusion, dis-placement, discrimination and a lack of belonging that Mexicans of African descent have had to confront, have inflicted a continuous, *colonial wound*<sup>3</sup> that has often shunted their own consciousness and self-awareness. For example, the lack of acknowledgment of the history of Afro-Mexicans in primary and secondary school textbooks has resulted in a fissure between an understanding of Afro-descendent identity today and its connection to its own history and that of Mexico; that is, knowing where they come from and what their role has been in Mexican history is largely absent among today's older and younger generations. This sentiment is echoed by a young member of the Afro-Mexican community of Laguna de Chacahua in the Costa Chica region of Oaxaca:

*Nos preguntan cómo queremos llamarnos, y yo digo, sabemos de la historia de los indios, pero no sabemos nada de los*

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<sup>3</sup> I borrow this term from Walter Mignolo who defines the colonial wound as the "wound inflicted by colonial (racialized) difference."

*negros... de dónde venimos, cómo éramos. Cuando conozcamos esa historia sabremos cómo llamarnos* (They ask us what we want to call ourselves, and I say, we know about the history of the Indians, but we don't know anything about the blacks, about where we come from, who we were. When we know about that history, we will know what to call ourselves). (*Guía para la acción pública* 21)

As articulated by this young individual, knowing where they come from and affirming a link to their past is a critical component in also being able to articulate who they are now and in the future. Local and regional civic and social organizations are taking on this task of knowledge production and dissemination related to the re-construction of Afro-Mexican identity, history, culture and memory. They are taking it upon themselves to fill in these gaps in (Afro)Mexican history and identity and respond to Zapata Olivella's questions: *¿cuál es **mi** cultura, **mi** raza, **mi** destino?*

This act of interrogation and (re)construction is illuminated in the central tenets upon which the non-profit, civic organization, *México Negro, A.C* is constituted. Founded in 1997, *México Negro* was conceived of as a collective unit that aimed to make visible the histories of Afro-descendent communities in the Costa Chica, and to address their current and future status, conditions, and challenges.

The organization was formally established during the first *Encuentro de los Pueblos Negros*, a meeting of leaders and elders from numerous black communities and towns in the region<sup>4</sup>. The content discussed during this first *Encuentro* in 1997 mirrored the comments of the young individual from Chacaua: the need to learn about their past and who they are now, in order to construct a different future. Participants in the meeting were asked:

What is the origin and history of your communities? What holidays are observed and how are they celebrated and organized? What is the lived experience of black identity (dances, verses, popular sayings, and organizational schemes)? How do blacks coexist among themselves and with mixed-race Indigenous populations?" (Méndez Tello).

These interrogations and the communal setting in which they were discussed, reflect the desire and need to (re)produce an-other archive which serves as a space of "learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge" (Taylor 16). More so, I highlight that the function of this archive is markedly different from the corpus of knowledge created in the post-Revolutionary period by Mexican anthropologists such as

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<sup>4</sup> Today, the *Encuentro* also includes scholars, social and community activists, artists, and students from within this region and from around the globe. It also alternates locations between cities in Oaxaca and Guerrero.

Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán. That is, instead of an archive formulated and articulated from a single (universal), hegemonic perspective, which has placed Afro-Mexicans and Afro-Mexican identity in a “*panorama cerrado* (closed panorama),” the archive of knowledge reflected upon and produced within this *Encuentro* and the 13 subsequent *Encuentros*, is collective, porous, and pluri-versal. It is an archive that is born out of an “open-endedness and multivocality” in the sense that numerous agents and sites of knowledge production have consistently been accessed and are active in this attempt to give voice to and make visible the history, present, and future of *afromexicanidad* (Taylor 16). Thus, in conjunction with the now, annual *Encuentro de los Pueblos Negros*, the organization *México Negro* has also served as a pluri-versal, instrumental, and influential site of knowledge production, expression, and dissemination, which facilitates awareness about Afro-Mexican identity, history, culture, and actuality in this region. This is outlined in a review of the objectives of this organization during the first *Encuentro*. One of its founding members, Donají Méndez Tello, describes the initial, central tenets of *México Negro*:

- *Compartir la historia de nuestro pueblo, profundizando en nuestro conocimiento sobre la historia de los Pueblos Negros en México* (To share the history of our people, and thus to

deepen our knowledge of the history of the black people in Mexico).

- *Fortalecer nuestra unión para luchar juntos por el progreso del Pueblo Negro, celebrando nuestra fe, nuestra vida y nuestra Identidad Negra* (To strengthen our unity to fight together for the progress of the black people, celebrating our faith, our life, and our black Identity).

It is interesting to note that how this declaration (re)claims Afro-Mexican history and identity; it appropriates this history and identity as “*lo propio*” (similar to the Zapata Olivella’s move in (re)claiming “my” identity, although here we move from an individual to a plural (re)claiming, “our”). I suggest that this is a very significant move in decolonizing blackness, which has historically been dis-placed and “stolen” from its roots (both territorial and epistemological roots). Furthermore, it is also important to highlight the expression of a call for unity in this declaration. I propose that, it is not a unity that is imagined via absolutisms, universalization, or homogenization, or as an end-point (as envisioned by Vasconcelos). Rather, it is a unity that is porous and in constant motion, constituted by diverse communities (the *pueblos negros*), and allows for both individual and collective agency. This conception and perception of unity is reflected in how both *México Negro* and the *Encuentro de los Pueblos Negros* operate.

This organization has supported numerous projects and programs that make visible expressions of identity and address the needs, lived conditions, challenges and aspirations of these black communities. For example, it supports workshops and collectives (such as the *Centro Cultural Cimarrón*) that foster artistic and cultural expression and exchange throughout the región in mediums such as painting, music, dance, story-telling, poetry, and gastronomy. Furthermore, it has mobilized social and political action to address the often invisible needs and lived-conditions of these communities: the need for improved access to educational resources and materials; enhanced investment in important regional economic sectors such as agriculture and fishing; and improvements in healthcare and medical resources and equipment. Due to the polarizing poverty and lack of political representation in this area, addressing these needs is crucial to the improvement of the living conditions and well-being of these communities.

As such, the performance, operation, construction, and perception of unity and of social and political action that are initiated, mobilized, and facilitated by *México Negro* and the *Encuentro de los Pueblos Negros*, is collective in nature and is molded by the configuration of networks in order to foster awareness and visibility of Afro-Mexicans in the Costa Chica. Moreover, it is a unity that requires “presence: people [that] participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by ‘being there’, being part of the transmission” (Taylor 19). I argue that this notion and inculcation of *presence* is also important for constructing a counter-cartography of *afromexicanidad* and for combating the dis-placement of these communities in Mexican history books—a highly representative extension of their framed *absence* in the nation.

#### ***4.2 Nomenclature, Identity in Politics, and the Re-Thinking of Afro-Mexican Consciousness***

If we return to the opening declaration from the young person from Chacahua, not only is there an expressed need to define Afro-Mexican (self)consciousness--of knowing where one comes from, of

who they are, what they will become; but also, linked to this consciousness is the need to know what to call oneself: “*Cuando conozcamos esa historia **sabremos cómo llamarnos.***” This section of this chapter addresses this need to “know what to call ourselves,” which I suggest is embedded in the selection and use of specific terminology and nomenclature appropriated by and used to refer to Mexicans of African descent. It is a terminology that reflects the complexity of identity and identification within and beyond these communities, and it exposes the consequences of a history and existence silenced and denied, which have “dispossessed [Afro-Mexicans] of the agency that might allow [them] to name [themselves]” (Viego 2).

For instance, the terms “*negro*” and “*moreno*” are commonly used by most Mexicans and, in particular, by a majority of Afro-Mexicans themselves to reference someone of African descent. As explained by Bobby Vaughn:

Both terms more or less denote the pigmentation of one’s skin: *negro* refers to the darkest skin and *moreno* refers to skin tones considered lighter. The use of the word *negro* is often-but not always-considered overly blunt and is avoided in polite conversation, (while the term *moreno*) is also the preferred term



in polite conversation, referring to a black person regardless of his or her color. (50)

Furthermore, while the use of these two terms not only links with conceptions and perceptions of coloration, that is, of darker and lighter shades of skin color, they also connect with an uneven and negative context or perspective towards the darker person or to darker people in general. That is, the term *negro* is more pejorative and can be used more often in a negative context, while the more polite and more positive perspective associated with the term *moreno* often results in this latter term being appropriated more often by Afro-Mexicans themselves. This strategic association and use of a particular term of identification is noted in the following statement by a primary school student from Pinotepa Nacional, Oaxaca:

*Pues es que yo no soy tan negrita como las demás chamacas, me pongo mis lindas faldas cuando voy a las fiestas y dice mi abuelita que me veo muy bien, que ni parezco de aquí, porque hay niñas que también se ponen sus buenas ropas pero nomás con que vayan a Pinotepa, ya saben que es de por acá, porque son muy negritas* (Well, it's that I am not as black as the other girls. I put on my pretty skirts when I go to parties, and my grandmother says that I look very good, that I don't even look as if I come from here, because there are other girls that wear pretty clothes and when they go to Pinotepa, you can tell that they are from here because they are very black). (*Guía para la acción pública* 24)

Another individual from Charco Redondo, Tututepec describes a family member's opinion towards being black:

*Esa, que es mi prima, no quiere ser negra y es tan negra como yo* (That person, who is my cousin, does not want to be black, and she is as black as me)." (Reyes Larrea, Rodríguez Mitchell, and Ziga Gabriel 8)

These two statements demonstrate how the term *negro* retains a more negative connotation, and how individuals reject and distance themselves not only from blackness itself, but also from degrees or shades of blackness as well. As noted in the first citation, to be darker or "more black" carries with it a burden of depreciatory consciousness, resulting in a dis-identification from blackness<sup>5</sup>. In the second excerpt, we see disagreement among family members who share the same "grade" of blackness. As such, the terminology used by these individuals illustrates the presence of conflicting opinions and perceptions within Afro-Mexican communities, and it also reveals how

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<sup>5</sup> This notion of dis-identification is similar to the materialization of alienation in the Fanonian double-bind that I describe and relate to the film "Angelitos negros." In the film, we see the rejection of blackness in order to gain acceptance. Here we see a similar example in which the inner turmoil of being black as an epidermalized mark or marker of being results in the individual dis-identification with and alienation of the burden of being black (or of having a darker skin color).

a social history of invisibility and marginalization have been connected with one's skin color, and have also affected the construction of the self and the articulation of identity through nomenclature used among these groups.

However, this view and use of the term *negro* is not always imbued with negativity. On the contrary, it is critical to explore how this term and others, including the term Afro-Mexican or *afromexicano*, are being appropriated and utilized by individuals, collectives, and organizations as a political project and as tools of recognition and re-investment in a multi-faceted and plural configuration of black consciousness.

For example, community leaders, organizations and collectives in Mexico have appropriated the term *afromexicano* or Afro-Mexican as a political project and as a foundational step in gaining official, juridical, and constitutional recognition as an ethnic group. During the *Primer Foro Nacional: Poblaciones Afrodescendientes en México* (First National Forum: Afro-Descendent Populations in Mexico) in September 2012, a statement declared the urgent need for:

*Pleno reconocimiento constitucional como Pueblo Afromexicano. Lo que implica la armonización de toda la legislación nacional, federal, y estatal* (full constitutional recognition as Afro-Mexican people, which implies the coordination of all of national, federal, and state legislation).

Similar to this excerpt, the term *afromexicano* is also the desired form of nomenclature that has been chosen by numerous leaders and representatives from these communities to appear on census documents. For community groups and those who are fighting for local and national political recognition, this term has been preferred and selected because it represents a link to global projects that aim to advance the full recognition and equal rights of Afro-descendent populations throughout the Americas. That is, it is a term that has been taken-up by many groups within Latin America and the Caribbean (*afrocolombiano, afrocubano, afroecuatoriano, afrobrasileño*, etc.), and it has also been the official term utilized by academics and institutions such as UNESCO and the UN, originally stemming from the conference on racism in Durban. Using the term *afromexicano* signifies being a part of a larger network and dialogue with other populations of African descent in the diaspora, especially in the Americas. For the communities in Mexico and around the world, it is a term that affirms the:

*Origen de sus ancestros y [el] recordar que el comercio de esclavos fue el principal acontecimiento histórico que generó la diáspora africana en el mundo, y con ello evitar que su identidad fuera definida a partir de uno solo de sus rasgos fenotípicos: el tono de piel (origen of their ancestors and remembers that the slave trade was the principle historical event that produced the African diaspora around the world, and with it, to avoid the definition of an identity solely defined by its phenotypical traits: skin color). (Guía para la acción pública 25)*

As such, utilizing the term *afromexicano* permits the African descendent communities in Mexico to establish and maintain social, cultural, and political links with global communities that share a history and colonial wound that has marked their past and present in the Americas.

A second term that I analyze again and that is commonly used by persons of African descent in Mexico, is the term *negro*. As previously demonstrated, we have seen it used within a pejorative context; however, numerous community members and organizations have imbued the idea of being *negro* with a positive vision, and as a term that incorporates multiple facets in the formation of identity. For instance, when interviewed by the *Consejo Piloto de la Población Negra de la Costa Chica* (Pilot Council of the Black Population in the Costa Chica) in collaboration with the organization *Africa, A.C.*, there was

unanimous agreement among numerous local community members on using the term *negro* in regards to a choice of nomenclature in a petition for inclusion on the national census. Although, as mentioned above, the term *afromexicano* has been selected as the preferred juridical term, individuals have also favored the term *negro* because it reflects their pride in their appearance and heritage that is linked to being black. As a woman from José María Morelos, Oaxaca explains:

*Nosotros somos negros, porque así nos consideramos. Entonces, de esa manera debemos aparecer. Nosotros nos sentimos orgullosos de ser negros, nos gusta que nos llamen negros. Para nosotros no es una afrenta que nos llamen negros* (We are blacks because that is what we consider ourselves to be. It is in this way that we should appear (on the census). We feel proud to be black, we like that they call us blacks. It is not an insult to us that they call us blacks). (Reyes Larrea, Rodríguez Mitchell, and Ziga Gabriel 7)

Another young man from Corralero similarly declares:

*Autoestima es lo fundamental. Aceptarse como negro. Nosotros mismos debemos identificarnos negros. Somos negros* (Self-esteem is fundamental. To accept oneself as *black*. We should identify ourselves as blacks. We are blacks). (Reyes Larrea, Rodríguez Mitchell, and Ziga Gabriel 8)

While these individuals understand being *negro* as being linked to a construction of identity linked to skin color and physical appearance (another interviewee references hair type), here we note

how the term itself represents the reality of numerous Afro-Mexicans in terms of their ethno-racial distinction and how they do not align blackness and being black with a negative and undesired acceptance of who they are. That is, unlike the voices that echo a rejection of and a disdain for being *negro* (as seen in previous citations in this section), there also exists a measurable notion within numerous local communities that links the term with pride. They are *negro* and wish to be identified as such. On the contrary, whitening or blurring and blending who they are into a *moreno*, *mulato*, or *mestizo* frame of reference is not who they claim to be.

Moreover, not only does the term *negro* denote pride and assurance in being black, but it is also a term that is being associated with myriad projects, traditions, histories, and epistemologies that circulate within these communities. Several social action, political and cultural groups emphasize the rich diversity and history that has been and continues to be a part of the Afro-Mexican legacy and identity. For example, organizations such as *México Negro* and the annual *Encuentro de los Pueblos Negros* promote the recognition and dissemination of the culture, knowledge, history, and contributions of

the black communities in Mexico. Their construction and use of the term *negro* in their names does not envision a negative and degrading perspective of blackness and of being black. In contrast, this organization and this annual event utilize the term as a marker that makes visible and highlights the various facets of this identity, including the varied cultural traditions and socio-historical contributions that link together the black towns within the Costa Chica region of Oaxaca and Guerrero.

In addition, the continued use and positive conception, perception, and investment in being *negro*, illustrate how community members understand and envision this term in relation to color. In Mexico, in terms of identity and identification, color and coloration are omnipresent and omnipotent. That is, despite the logic of *mestizaje* which prescribes identity as a monochromatic amalgamation and universalization of color (the *mestizo* is a construct and end-point of a single coloration): being whiter, darker, and browner is pervasive in the interactions and operations of Mexican society. It is not the one-drop rule of coloration as in the United States, but rather a color continuum that is epidermalized and highly influential in every day



social, political, economic, and cultural spaces and experiences. Thus, in engaging and appropriating the term *negro*, I argue that these communities are not framing a consciousness that denies or distances color and coloration; but rather, de-links this consciousness from the racialization of color and coloration. That is, this is a de-linking from racialized frames that privilege and imbue certain spectrums of color/coloration over others (whiter over darker). This is similar to the cultural movement of “black is beautiful” that began in the 1960’s in the United States. Today, in the Costa Chica, we see this echoed in the “*orgullo de ser negro* (pride to be black),” as seen in the statements above and in the organizing drum beat and slogan of the *Encuentros de los Pueblos Negros*, respectively: “*me siento orgullos@ de ser negr@* (I feel proud to be black” and “*Por la memoria de quienes nos legaron su historia y su color* (For the memory of those who bequeathed us their history and their color)” (Méndez Tello).

Finally, I also invite us to note how the term *negro* itself is often referenced in the plural (*negros*) and, now more recently, also in the gender-neutral form (*negr@/negr@s*). This particular, strategic action is of critical importance in illustrating another important component of

identity formation and of the identity in politics within these communities and by these organizations. In understanding blackness as a plural construct and as a configuration and space that acknowledges the different experiences and visions associated with being a black male and a black female in Mexico, the term *negr@s* presents a pluri-versal construction of being black. That is, being *negr@* is not understood as a singular and essentialized mode of being only associated with a male perspective, or as an identity inherently based on skin color. Rather, it is a notion that links blackness and black identity to a multi-layered and diverse heritage and state-of-being, where different voices of gender, sexuality, age, and lineage are all a part of the conversation on “who we are and what to call ourselves.” I propose that it is an identity rooted in collective contexts, and involves or overlaps with various group allegiances or characteristics (Larraín 24). This is a highly significant gesture in defining the *pueblos negr@s* of Mexico, which are not perceived and conceived as a single, fixed, absolute black entity, but rather as a united network of diverse traditions, perspectives, and experiences.

In fact, I argue that it is also the foregrounding of experience that marks and helps to make this a pluri-versal conception and perception of identity. Linking with Gloria Anzaldúa's construction of the "new *mestiza* consciousness," I suggest that Afro-Mexican consciousness similarly comes from experiences of being and belonging in the borderlands. That is, it is a consciousness that is born from a space in which one has had to continually encounter, confront, and engage their own contradictions along the lines of race, class, language, gender, sexuality, age, and/or nationality. For example, as delineated in the first segment of this section, numerous individuals in the Afro-Mexican communities in the Costa Chica have had to confront the contradictory experience of reading Mexican history, while simultaneously being omitted from it ("*sabemos de la historia de los indios, pero no sabemos nada de los negros*"). This particular example reflects an experience of being in border or in the "spaces in between" (Mignolo, *Local Histories* 67), of being Mexican, but not quite, not yet.<sup>6</sup> It is an experience of dichotomy, of contradiction, and of being a

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<sup>6</sup> Leo Ching references the experience of Asians who encounter a similar contradiction in terms of their integration in the U.S., of being "not white, not quite, not yet."

“sandwich between two cultures” (Anzaldúa 100), that numerous individuals, groups, communities, and even nations experience when their presence and existence is framed as problematic by other, dominant groups. As described in chapters one and two, blackness and Mexicans of African descent have commonly been framed and represented as problematic in relation to *mexicanidad*.

However, similar to Anzaldúa’s theorizations, the experience of the borderlands, of being dis-placed, silenced and made invisible can also serve as a linking, as a coming together of multiple meanings, being, and ways of thinking. Within these borderlands and encounters of in-between-ness or internal foreign-ness is a shared unity by multiple border crossers of “all colors, all classes, all races, all time periods...Blacks with Jews with Indians with Asians with whites with extraterrestrials” (Anzaldúa 106-107). And, as this lesbian, chicana, feminist author illustrates in her own description of her own identity,<sup>7</sup> as a joining and a network of identifications:

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<sup>7</sup> Anzaldúa never denies or silences the various identifications which unite together and comprise her own, new *mestiza* consciousness.

**Soy un amasamiento, I** am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings. **We** are the people who leap in the dark, **we** are the people on the knees of the gods. In **our** very flesh, (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures. (102-103)

That is, experience (especially that of the colonial wound), transforms from a singular locus of enunciation (Anzaldúa's "I" or Zapata Olivella's "my") to a pluri-versal locus of enunciation (Anzaldúa's "we" and *México Negro's* "our"). And, this transformation, in turn, unites many from within and between different border locations and expressions of identity.

I suggest that, as seen in the choices of nomenclature in the case of Afro-Mexican identity today, this is a very fitting quote as it resonates with the way in which Afro-Mexicans are envisioning identity not as a singular, static entity, but instead as mobile and dynamic networks of identity and identifications based on shared and/or common experiences between the *pueblos negr@s* and other populations in the Americas (whether or not of African descent). Furthermore, it is a vision that does not code difference as a clash of cultures (similar to what both Samuel Huntington and José

Vasconcelos conceptualize in their attempts to define “who we are” in reference to the United States and Mexico, respectively). But rather, it “works out the clash” by putting the different and unique trajectories, memories, epistemologies, and histories into conversation with each other.

In essence, I propose that this pluri-versal configuration of being *negr@* or *afromexican@* is one that reclaims consciousness and the making of identity through a heterogeneity that is not managed from above (via the State), nor is absorbed and erased. That is, it is a unity conceived and perceived through diversity. Or, as echoed by Stuart Hall, it is not identity through:

essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference. (“Cultural Identity and Diaspora” 235)

Moreover, by acknowledging, appropriating, and embracing their own diversity and the multiplicity of traditions, epistemologies, and experiences of *afromexicanidad*, I suggest that these individuals and communities of African descent in Mexico are also agents of their own identity and, hopefully, of their own destiny. This is illustrated in the

document “*Nuestra palabra* (Our Word),” created by participants in the 5<sup>th</sup> *Encuentro*:

*Los afromexicanos, somos los más olvidados de todos los pueblos de México. Debemos revisar nuestra historia para reafirmar nuestra identidad... (We, Afro-Mexicans, are the most forgotten of all of the Mexican peoples. We must review our history in order to reassert our identity...). (Nuestra Palabra, documento final del V Encuentro de Pueblos Negros 2001)*

It is a destiny and an identity conversely constructed in comparison to the fate of blackness within the Vasconcelian framework of *mestizaje*, which, in privileging whiteness, relegates the black type to a destiny of invisibility, denigration, and unrecognition or anonymity in homogeneity. On the contrary, here we see how being part of the *pueblos negr@s* is an imagined community in which one type, one voice, or one tradition is not privileged over another, in which the construction of being is not a process of essentialization or racialization, and in which types are no longer pawns that are spoken for (or silenced) within the politics of a hierarchically imagined identity. Perhaps this pluri-versal understanding of *pueblos negr@s* and of being *negr@* can elucidate a thing or two about a truly diverse, pluricultural, and plurilingual vision of *mexicanidad*, just as it is doing

in regards to the configuration and cartography of blackness and of *afromexicanidad*.



## Conclusions

To conclude, I again engage the previous chapter's introductory quotes by José Vasconcelos and Manuel Zapata Olivella. While Vasconcelos attempts to speak in plural, expressing how "we" shall arrive at the creation of a new race, he actually speaks for others, namely the marginalized masses, whose voices, agency, and being have been drowned out in an already fixed vision of who they are and what they will become in the making of *mestizo* identity and in the mapping of *mexicanidad*. This vision and map of being and belonging, which was drafted in 1925, has dis-placed, problematized, and silenced blackness and persons, histories, and cultures of African descent in Mexico. It is also a vision and mapping of blackness that has been resonated in multiple spheres of knowledge production and in widely disseminated receptacles of representation: from official, State-sponsored archives formulated by Mexican anthropologists such as Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, to popular culture such as film and comics, and even in juridical and genomic maps.

On the contrary, if we bring Manuel Zapata Olivella into this conversation, we can speak of a counter-cartography and of a plurality in this act of mapping being and belonging. That is, in contrast to Vasconcelos, the

maps configured and envisioned by this Afro-Colombian author, and by Afro-Mexican individuals, organizations, collectives, and communities that are highlighted in this dissertation, are ones in which the difference of each part and each voice is recognized as part of the interconnected whole. Moreover, within this pluri-versal map, recognition and the power to recognize are decolonized: it is not recognition imbued with uneven power (such as peace negotiations where one side's humanity and right to exist is yet to be recognized before they can come to the negotiating table; or, as in the slave-master paradigm, where slaves must first have their humanity recognized and granted by the other side, before they can discuss the terms of their liberty). Instead, I suggest, it is a recognition in which each one asserts and participates in their own power to recognize the other (one is not always powerless nor silenced nor invisible); where the "respect for difference" is at its core ("Social and Political Recognition"); and, it is a definition and operation of recognition that deconstructs and rebels against displacement and exclusion, which Hannah Arendt theorizes as a mode of injustice and as a lack of participation and public (and private) freedom. In this respect, recognition is operating as justice, freedom, and decoloniality, which I extend to the projects and narratives of internal and external awareness that are being produced in contemporary Afro-Mexican communities.

Moreover, in questioning this destiny of voice and being: Who is he? What is his destiny, his culture, his race? Zapata Olivella also demonstrates that he is not satisfied with that which has been bestowed onto him, and he is not content to be spoken for. Instead, his query presents a challenge, especially to those marginalized masses, to take the initiative themselves and rise-up, "*levántate*," "change their position of always being the *other*, and become agents of their own liberation and destiny" (Prescott 12). This is precisely what is being done by organizations, such as *México Negro*, and by collective projects and programs, such as the *Encuentro de los Pueblos Negros*, the *Centro Cultural Cimarrón*, and the radio show *Cimarrón: la voz de los afromestizos*.

Finally, this understanding and theorization of consciousness that I elaborate on in the previous chapter, as an engagement of the recognition of identity in politics, of empowerment, of agency, and of pluri-versality, is reflected in the work being done in Afro-Mexican communities today, where identity is being envisioned as an unbounded and open construction, and as a local, national and perhaps even global network in constant transformation. For this segment of the Mexican population, identity is not an end-point without a future or a pathway of unity without diversity. Instead, it is what Aimé Césaire describes as a "universal rich with all that is particular, rich

with all the particulars there are, the deepening of each particular, the coexistence of them all" (25). With the creation of organizations such as *México Negro*, and projects and forums such as the *Encuentro de los Pueblos Negros* and the artistic (re)articulations of *cimarronaje cultural*, the *pueblos negr@s* in Mexico have been actively committing themselves not only to fighting for greater visibility, but also for the assertion of their presence, participation, and agency in relation to the destiny of their own history and identity, and in relation to the destiny and roadmap of *mexicanidad* and of Mexico's *porvenir*.

**FIGURES 1-6**



Figure 1: Mural Painting, *Centro Cultural Cimarrón*



Figure 2: Mural Painting, *Centro Cultural Cimarrón*



Figure 3: Mural Painting, *Centro Cultural Cimarrón*





Figure 4: *Nafragio*, Aydée Rodriguez Lopez





Figure 5: *Naufragio*, Aydée Rodríguez López



Figure 6: *Naufragio*, Aydée Rodriguez Lopez

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Talia Weltman-Cisneros was born in Johannesburg, South Africa and immigrated to Dallas, Texas in the mid-1980's. She completed her undergraduate education at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, where she received her B.A. in Spanish in 2000. While at Emory she also received an Emory International Scholars Research Abroad grant to conduct research on the contemporary role and uses of Judeo-Spanish in Caracas, Venezuela. Talia completed her post-graduate education at Duke University, receiving her M.A. and Ph.D. in the Department of Romance Studies in 2010 and 2013, respectively. She also received a certificate in Latin American Cultural Studies. At Duke she was a part of the John Hope Franklin Humanities Institute's Dissertation Working Group, and she received several Mellon Conference and Research travel grants from the Duke Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies. In addition to teaching at Duke University, she has also been a member of the faculty at Meredith College in Raleigh, North Carolina, and at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. In addition, she served as a research consultant for the exhibit "Pathways to Freedom in the Americas: Shared Experiences



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