

México Negro: From the Shadows of Nationalist Mestizaje to New Possibilities in Afro-Mexican Identity

by

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There is a prevailing view in Mexico that blacks don't exist in ways that they exist in other countries; that there may be some people with some black ancestry, but they are not pure black. As a dark-skinned African American I was oftentimes used as evidence in this argument. I have been told countless times throughout the country that there are no blacks *like me* in Mexico. One Afro-Mexican went as far as to suggest that in comparison to him, that *my people* were the *true blacks*. Some friends in Mexico City, when I began my work in the mid-1990s, explained to me that the people in the state of Veracruz and the Costa Chica region weren't actually black, but their dark skin (and presumably kinky hair) were the result of their exposure to the harsh sun. These assertions that there are no black Mexicans were often followed by the almost obligatory "we're all mixed in Mexico" which might typically lead to an almost glib statement that "we're all equal in Mexico."

Both Mexican scholars and many Afro-Mexicans themselves articulate their understanding of Mexican blackness in ways that attempt to distance that experience from those of the larger African diaspora by asserting a kind of exceptionalism – that Mexico is somehow so different from other places that blackness, if it exists at all, is so unique that it must be understood only on its own terms. These terms more often than not conceive of blackness as a kind of quantifiable substance that Mexicans of African descent have *much less of* than blacks in most any other place. In this article, I suggest that, indeed, in some ways Mexican blackness might be lived differently than blackness in other places, but this does not negate that it is a black experience; rather, it simply exemplifies the diversity within the African diaspora and therefore it is part and parcel to what black identity is and can be.

I have chosen to explore three elements of black identity in Mexico. First, I will explore some of the intellectual roots of the culturally dominant idea that Afro-Mexicans do not exist -- that powerful ideology of nationalist mestizaje (race-mixing).

Second, I explore how Mexican academics, through their invention of the *afromestizo*, have contributed to the sense that black Mexicans are a kind of weak approximation of the authentic black people that we might find in other national contexts. And last, I turn to a brief discussion of Afro-Mexicans themselves in the Costa Chica. In that discussion I describe how blacks have traditionally held a complex view of their own blackness; a self-conscious black ethnic identity alongside an uneasy participation in anti-black discourses and attitudes. Finally, I highlight how Afro-Mexicans, through increased connections with blacks from other countries, are beginning to resonate with a more empowering understanding of their ethnic identity. That new understanding rejects the assimilationist model of nationalist mestizaje.

Laying the Ideological Groundwork: Mestizaje Takes Hold

Both the invisibility of Afro-Mexicans from the national consciousness as well as the stigmatization that blacks variously suffer and adopt can be linked to nationalist mestizaje, Mexico's dominant racial paradigm. I argue that the cult of mestizaje -- while originally envisioned as a progressive strategy -- is most centrally an aversion to racial purity; an aversion to blackness, Indian-ness, and to a much lesser degree, to whiteness.¹ While fuller treatments of the history of Mexican nationalist mestizaje ideology can be found elsewhere (Brading 2001; Gutiérrez 1998; Smith 1996; Rosa 1996; Frye 1996; Knight 1990) it is instructive to outline some of the most relevant aspects of the ideology that become the lens through which most Mexicans view their own racial identity, and that of others.

Mexico's embrace of mixed racial origins as central to what it means to be Mexican began as a progressive response to 19th century anti-Indian, anti-black, and anti-Asian racism. Many North American politicians saw racial discourse as fair play in their war of words against their southern neighbor. For United States critics, it was precisely their mixed-race that made them inferior to the white Americans (Horsman 1981, 212). Josiah C. Nott, one of the leading scientific racists of the day, in characterizing the Mexican people, argued that "wherever in the history of the world the inferior races have been conquered and mixed in with the Caucasian, the latter have sunk into barbarism" (ibid, 130). Similarly, a member of the Texas-Santa Fe expedition claimed that, "There are no people on the continent of America, whether civilized or uncivilized, with one or two exceptions, more miserable in condition or despicable in morals than the mongrel race inhabiting New Mexico" (ibid, 212). An 1846 editorial appearing in the *Augusta Daily Chronicle* warned that annexation would likely produce a "sickening mixture, consisting of such a conglomeration of Negroes and Rancheros, Mestizoes and Indians, with but a few Castilians" (ibid, 239).

Mexican elites adopted this Eurocentric view of mixed-race inferiority and the ideology was popular throughout the latter part of the 19th century during the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911). The emerging concept of nationhood saw Europe as the model to be emulated, both culturally and racially.² During this period, invocations of indigenous culture were little more than empty rhetoric and even this rhetoric had diminished significantly since independence. The Mexican Revolution of 1910 toppled the Porfirio Díaz regime and catalyzed a whole range of political and social reforms. Leaders sought ways to incorporate the country's indigenous and mestizo peasant majorities. The question now became whether Mexico would be a mestizo nation or an indigenous one (Basave Benítez 1992, 121). By the end of the 1920s the issue was largely settled – the Mexican national character was to comprise a modern mestizo identity resting on a pre-Hispanic indigenous foundation.³ This formulation left no room for Mexicans of African descent, relegating them to the margins.

The Invention of the Afromestizo: Watered-down Blackness

Mexican mestizaje as an ideological project (if by ideological we mean the beliefs by which a society orders reality) is based on a number of basic tenets. First is the idea that modern Mexico is a unified national community of a particular racial character – a mixed Cosmic Race (Vasconcelos 1979) forged in the colonial crucible that merged the indigenous and Spanish, producing the so-called mestizo nation. The second important feature of Mexican mestizaje flows from essentially a doubling down on the first feature, namely, that there is no room for “non-mestizos” in modern Mexico. The foundational architects of this ideology in the 1920s were clear that neither indigenous people nor blacks were envisioned as part of this modern mestizo Mexico, (Knight 1990; Gerardo 2011; Pansters 2005; Yankelevich 2012). As such both academic and everyday discussions of Mexicans of African descent tend to start with the need, however subtly, to establish that there are no pure blacks in Mexico and that a discussion of this population is more properly a study of race mixture.

Much of the scholarship on Mexicans of African descent begins with the premise that the contemporary descendants of enslaved African descendants who lived primarily in the Costa Chica region and in Veracruz are best thought of as racially mixed. The term *afromestizo* has gained wide acceptance in the literature. The term almost always refers to Mexicans of African descent, while the literature treating the rest of the African diaspora tends to use the common Afro-prefix appended to the nation in question, i.e., afrocubano, afro-brasileiro, afroperuano, afrocolombiano, Afro- or African American, etc. That Mexican scholars have eschewed such conventions suggests uneasiness with likening the black experience in Mexico with that of the larger diaspora.⁴

Mexican scholarship's view of black Mexicans as essentially a mixed-race people began with the recognized pioneer of Afro-Mexican studies, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, who, early in his 1958 ethnography entitled *Cuijla: Ethnographic Sketch of a Black Town* (Cuijla: esbozo etnográfico de un pueblo negro) clarified for the reader who these so-called black people really are:

Even the groups that today *could be considered blacks*, those who, due to their isolation and conservatism, have been able to retain predominantly Negroid somatic characteristics and African cultural traits, are in reality, *nothing more than mestizos*, products of a biological mixture and the result of the dynamic of acculturation (Aguirre Beltrán 1989, 7-8, emphasis mine).

That Aguirre Beltrán's insists that these black people are in reality mixed, even though they have both physical and cultural markers that might easily lead one to believe they were, indeed, black is consistent nationalist mestizaje discourses and resonated with mid-20th century anthropology's embracing of theories of acculturation and assimilation (Mörner 1967). The argument that these so-called black people are in reality something other than black recalls the social construction of race; race is not a concept of nature or of the body, but is a contested concept of the mind.

If Aguirre Beltrán invented the *afromestizo*, its uncritical use has continued to the present. In the late 1980s a federal government research initiative, *El Programa Nuestra Tercera Raíz* [Our Third Root], began its work.⁵ Consistent with nationalist mestizaje ideology, the metaphor of the Third Root conceives of the African "roots" as being the third root alongside both the indigenous and Spanish roots – a variation on the melting pot image. These three roots undergird and give rise to the national tree of a mestizo Mexico. The importance of the roots, as such, lies in their functional role—not in their existence as a people. Rather, their importance lies their providing the raw material to produce mestizo Mexico as the finished product. As such, the project tended to focus more on the raw material of cultural traits and contributions blacks made to the national fabric. While the project drew much needed academic and public attention to Afro-Mexico, the discourse under which it operated underscored mestizo Mexico, rather than exploring Afro-Mexican people's own subjectivity.

Blackness in the Costa Chica: Grappling with Identity

The Costa Chica region, comprising coastal plains in both Oaxaca and Guerrero states, is one of the few areas of Mexico where significant numbers of Afro-Mexican live today. My ethnographic research is drawn primarily from the state of Oaxca's Jamiltepec District.⁶ The rural district covers about 1600 square miles and includes the main municipalities of Pinotepa Nacional, and Huazolotitlán. Within these municipalities I focused my research on a number of small towns, including Cerro de la Esperanza, El Ciruelo, Collantes, José María Morelos, and Santa María Chiometepepec.

As we have seen, the literature on Mexicans of African descent prefers to use the term *afromestizo* to refer to this population. The term is very rarely used among Afro-Mexicans in the area under study. Much more common are the terms *moreno* and *negro*.⁷ *Afromestizo*, as a composite term, features both the idea of African descent as well as mixed-ness. Black people in the coastal lowlands don't often highlight mixedness in describing themselves, as is the case in the following exchange I had with a farmer 62-year old farmer (A):

A: It's pretty obvious that we're black (*que somos negros*) isn't it? I'm obviously not white, who's going to believe that? And we're not like the Indians (*indios*) – you know that.

BV: What about *mestizos*? Who are the *mestizos*?

A: The *mestizos*? Who knows? I think those are the people who are a little bit of this and that? With skin a little lighter than mine? Mixed people who aren't from here? You tell me...who are the *mestizos*?

Similarly, another man who self-described as “*moreno*” met the use of the word *metizo* with some confusion: “*mestizos*...aren't they the white people who cross with Indians? I'm not sure.”

The *mestizo*, that powerful symbol of nationalist Mexican identity is encountered as a “technical term” in the region, with no self-evident meaning. As an “educated” person, I was expected to know what the word meant, and shed some light on it. People were familiar with the word *mestizo*, but were over-all a bit mystified by it.⁸ The lack of salience of that term speaks to a social-historical experience in which Afro-Mexicans were identified in contradistinction not to *mestizos*, but to the socially dominant whites –*la gente blanca*. In addition, blacks saw themselves as distinctly different from the seemingly unambiguously marked *indios*.⁹ As one informant explained to me, “There are three kinds of people: *indios*, *morenos*, y *blancos*.”

Negros: We May Be Black, But Not *That* Black! Holding Blackness at Arm's Length

Afro-Mexicans, tend to describe themselves as either *moreno* or *negro*. These terms can be used to describe individuals, i.e., a *moreno* being a bit lighter in color than a *negro*. While this descriptive language is interesting, it tends to be quite different from the language of group categories. When people categorize “kinds of people,” or ethnic groups, the terms *negro* and *moreno* tend to be used interchangeably – people don't tend to talk about *morenos* as belonging to a different *group* than *negros*. *Morenos* and *negros* are comprised the same ethnic group, a group we can comfortably refer to as Afro-Mexican.

Elsewhere (Vaughn 2001) I discuss at greater length how blacks use “moreno” as a euphemism for negro. One example from that discussion frames the issue well and I reprise it here. As I chatted casually with two black women one afternoon, the conversation turned to the subject of an upcoming wedding. Estreberta and Tía had the following exchange:

E: Yeah, She’s going to get married with a *negro* from Morelos.

T: Oh, don’t say *negro*, Estreberta!

E: But he *is negro*. Just as *negro* as me!

In this context, Estreberta was admonished not for being inaccurate, but rather, for having failed to employ the nicety of *moreno* in order to “soften” negro. Afro-Mexicans are not unique in their use of both negro and *moreno* in a kind of dance between racial identification and what is considered polite (See Gil-White (2001) on Brazil and Duany (2000) on Puerto Rico). Many people express uneasiness with fully assuming a black identity, especially using terms like negro. As in other Latin American contexts, blackness has been stigmatized to the extent that the unadulterated embrace of that identity would have to challenge deeply ingrained stereotypes.

In order for me to do ethnographic research on Mexicans of African descent in Mexico, I obviously needed locate a site for my work. In my earliest trips to the region, upon asking locals where I might set up shop to learn about Afro-Mexican life and culture, people were rather quick to offer a short list of communities that I should explore. Upon arriving to those communities, I would be told that their community wasn’t nearly as black as some other town. It became clear to me that no community in the Costa Chica wanted to be recognized as being the most black town in all of Mexico. The towns that would come up most often in conversation as being the “most black” towns in the region -- the towns where I would be better off carrying out my research -- were Santo Domingo Armenta, Collantes, Santiago Tapextla, and a few others. During one of these early exploratory conversations I had with a self-described *moreno* (A). I asked why he suggested I visit Santo Domingo.

A: If you are looking for *gente negra* you should go to Santo Domingo. That’s where you’ll find *pura gente negra* (only black people). Here, we are all mixed by now, but that’s where you’ll find *la mera negrada* (translation: an honest to goodness bunch of blacks).

BV: So you’ve been there? Do you go there much?

A: No, I’ve never been there, to tell you the truth.

BV: But, you know there are lots of blacks there –

A: Oh yeah, everybody knows that! You’ll see – *pura gente negra* over there.

This kind of exchange was repeated on many occasions, on many different scales. In the state of Oaxaca, I was told that the neighboring Guerrero state was where I would find the largest black populations, and predictably, in Guerrero state I was referred to Oaxaca.¹⁰

Even in the communities in which the regional consensus suggested as the principal sites of blackness, people in those communities tended to distance themselves from blackness by assigning the height of blackness to the past. The following quotes come from informants during the summer of 2008:

Back in the old days there used to be far more black people here. My grandmother tells me that when she was a child everybody was black back then. Now we're more mixed (*revueltos*).

“Now there are not as many *gente negra* here – you see that a lot of outsiders are here now. The real natives of Collantes are *los morenos*. Everything gets better, right (laughter)?

They say that years ago before they built the highway that we were only *gente negra* here – the *morenos* lived here in the lowlands and the *indios* lived in the hills. Now there aren't as many *morenos* here. They still have a lot over in Tapextla, though, I think.

Thus, blackness is often held at arm's length, with such length being either the distance to a *blacker* town or the arm's length of *blacker* generations past. People don't appear to be unclear as to what Mexican blackness is.

It wasn't long before I began to hear the words *blanco* and *gente blanca* used frequently to describe people who were neither black nor indigenous. Afro-Mexicans commonly used the word *blanco* to describe the dominant light-skinned elites who tended to hail from the entrenched landed aristocracy – families that have held a near monopoly on political and economic power for generations. Whiteness is associated with wealth as well as physical beauty. Contrasting whiteness with blackness, an elderly dark-skinned Afro-Mexican woman whose husband was white crystalized the distinction for me:

I don't like the ugly black race...I don't like it. That's why I sought out a white man (*un guerito*). Because if I had married someone from here, think how would my children have turned out! That nappy, hard hair...

Younger people with whom I have spoken also express similar understandings of whiteness as preferred over blackness. In a conversation with Tiburcio, a 19-year old self-described *negro* this was emphasized. As I had established a level of rapport with him, we had somewhat of a give-and-take discussion. It started out with my asking whether he thought a particular woman in town was attractive. She was dark-skinned with an athletic build and was, to my eyes, classically attractive.

BV: What about Susi? Do you think she's attractive?

T: Yes, she's attractive; it's just that she's too dark.

BV: What do you mean, too dark?

T: You know, if somebody went out with her he would get made fun of. People would say "What are you doing? Do you want your kids to look like little pieces of coal?"

BV: So she would have a hard time finding a man?

T: Yeah, I think so. Let's face it, Bobby. White is simply prettier than black. It's always been that way. But that's not a problem here because we're mostly mixed, here. The race continues to improve.

These examples highlight several things. First, Afro-Mexicans tend to prefer light skin over dark skin. This is a somewhat generalized view that has been reiterated consistently over the course of my fieldwork. As is the case in other Latin American contexts (Andrews 2004; Hanchard 1994; Stepan 1991), strategically *improving the race* through efforts among blacks to marry *up* is part of the Afro-Mexican experience as well. That Tiburcio linked efforts among blacks to lighten the race toward the preferred color to the idea that the town is already mixed suggests how nationalist mestizaje discourse is comfortable with anti-black, pro white discourses. The goal of mestizaje is accomplished through strategies that are explicitly anti-black and pro-white.

21st Century Blackness – Beyond the Confines of Mestizaje

Alongside these relatively negative understandings of blackness and efforts by Afro-Mexicans to distance themselves from the stigmas associated with a black identity are emerging conceptions of blackness that challenge racist ideas of what it means to be black. Asserting blackness as a positive identity – as a source of cultural pride – grows more common as Afro-Mexicans engage with political currents across the African diaspora.

Beginning in the 1990s Afro-Mexicans in the Costa Chica began to organize around a black identity and in 1997 the grassroots organization México Negro was formed. The driving force behind the group was Trinidadian-born parish priest Father Glyn Jemmott. Jemmott, having lived among Afro-Mexicans for some thirteen years prior to the founding of México Negro, found that many black locals were intrigued by and attracted to the organization's efforts to highlight their history and cultural uniqueness. One female participant in the early years of the organization told me in 2001:

I think this is wonderful that we are doing this. I think we need to celebrate our history and culture as *negros*. Just like you know about your history, we need to know about ours. It's a beautiful thing to learn about ourselves, to know that there is something good about being *negro*.

What this person was referring to was her participation in the annual Meetings of Black Towns (Encuentros de Pueblos Negros) which began in 1997 and continue to this date.¹¹ The three-day events showcased and celebrated the Afro-Mexican experience and provided a forum for people to contemplate solutions to the social needs of black Mexicans. They often included outside scholars and tourists (sometimes from the United States) who observed the proceedings and often engaged locals in conversations about the African diaspora as well as elements of Afro-Mexican history.

From the late 1990s a growing number of Afro-Mexican groups has emerged in the Costa Chica. Each group appears to engage with, in varying degrees, cultural awareness and political recognition, and ecological development. The groups include Africa A.C, Epoca, and ECOSTA. Each of these groups has been involved in the as yet unattained effort to achieve federal recognition of blacks as a distinct ethnic group¹². Currently, only indigenous communities are federally recognized, leaving Afro-Mexicans left out of the national census as well as any other ethnic group specific government resources. Indeed, these groups can be said to be fighting against continued invisibility, as has been the case with Afro-Latin Americans over the past several decades (Minority Rights Group 1995). Add to these organizing efforts the launching of local radio programming from an Afro-Mexican perspective and the decision of both the Catholic parish in Pinotepa Nacional and Pinotepa Nacional's municipal government to create offices to address the region's black communities, and we see a changing discourse.

While these black revitalization efforts have been criticized as the products of outside indoctrination and agitation by black "culture workers" with their own agendas (Lewis 2012), that growing numbers of Afro-Mexicans are finding resonance with these new ways of living a black identity is most instructive. These movements have not turned the Costa Chica into a hotbed of afrocentric political activity. What they have done is to advance a different idea of black identity.

Rather than allow blackness be misunderstood as either non-existent or simply a minor variant of a mestizo identity that has little connection to the larger diaspora, they have put blackness on the map as a coherent ethnic identity.

I have attempted to show that Afro-Mexicans have long assumed a black identity – their society has always been ordered in terms of black, white, and Indian. What is new is that they are beginning to re-cast blackness as a positive identity – one with both local meaning and international significance. Identity in the Costa Chica is complex – there is no consensus among Afro-Mexicans as to what blackness means; there are many ways of finding one's place in Mexico's racial landscape. While nationalist mestizaje ideologies have and continue to influence how Afro-Mexicans understand their place in the world, the underlying limits of such a discourse -- the cult of race-mixing while rejecting blacks and Indians -- are starting to unravel and blacks are opening up spaces for more affirming approaches to living a black Mexican reality.

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Notes

¹ While, theoretically, mestizaje celebrates the mixing of blackness, Indian-ness, and whiteness to create the mestizo, it is clear that both blackness and Indian-ness are stigmatized while whiteness and light skin continue to enjoy powerful privilege in Mexico (Villarreal 2010).

² The Díaz regime encouraged and facilitated migration of people from largely white areas of Mexico (Michoacán, Guanajuato, and Puebla) to settle in largely mestizo and black regions in order to *mejorar la raza* [improve the race]. There have been two such migrations documented (1890 and 1900) in an Afro-Mexican region of Veracruz (Cruz Carretero 1989:69).

³ Elsewhere (Vaughn 2001) I discuss some of the debates among the architects the emergent race-based nationalist ideology, including the contributions of mestizofiles like José Vasconcelos (1979) and *indigenistas* such as Andrés Molina Enríquez (1909), Manuel Gamio (1916), and Alfonso Caso (1954).

⁴ I do not at all suggest that scholarship that employ the term *afromestizo* is flawed, as much of it adds immensely to the emerging body of knowledge about blacks in Mexico, particularly the historical work. My goal is simply to draw attention to the fact that conceiving of Afro-Mexicans as *afromestizos* privileges their “mixedness” and suggest that they are somehow more mixed than Afro-Latin American peoples.

⁵ The program supported interdisciplinary research on the black presence throughout the Americas with a focus on Mexico. Through its publications and symposia the program helped create a critical mass of scholars (primarily colonial historians) exploring the Afro-Mexican experience. Luz María Martínez Montiel (Martínez Montiel 1994) founded the program and is its principal protagonist.

⁶ The research in this article is based on data collected on more than ten research trips to the region beginning in 1995. This article draws from hundreds of hours of interviews and conversations I have had with locals, the last such opportunity being in the winter of 2010.

⁷ It is important to note that my subsuming people described variously as negro or moreno under the analytical category of “black” or Afro-Mexican runs the risk of my imposing my own culturally learned categories on others. I have tried to be mindful of this risk and in my fieldwork and writing have tried as much as possible to use racial descriptors in ways that are consistent with local usage. In local usage one discovers that the same person may identify himself or the same 3rd person using negro and moreno interchangeably. What becomes very clear is that racial descriptors are inherently contingent, contested, and interpretive -- there is no way to actually “get it right” no matter what nomenclature one uses.

⁸ Sue (2008) also finds that very few people in Veracruz use the word “mestizo” in everyday speech and people employ it with some uncertainty.

⁹ Afro-Mexicans tend to quite easily identify Indians. They associate them strongly with their customary clothing, their straight hair, and their language (Coastal Mixtec in the area under study). They further characterized themselves (and any other nonindigenous people) as “*gente de razón*,” recalling colonial classifications that marginalized indigenous people.

¹⁰ Incidentally, in Veracruz state, where, indeed, there are a number of contemporary black communities (see (Cruz Carretero 1989; Rowell and Jones 2008; Saucedo, Garcia, and Castro 2008; Sue 2010)) I was told in 1999 by a worker in the Veracruz Tourist Bureau told me that he had “never seen Mexican *gente negra* here. There are *no gente negra* here; we’re all mixed and we don’t have discrimination.”

¹¹ I participated in some of the early work of the organization, primarily in several planning sessions where I offered assistance in planning some of the early public events. In these early meetings it was made clear to me that the use of the word negro as part of the organization’s name as well as in the name of the signature public event was intentional -- leaders wanted to begin to allow Mexican blackness to be demystified and legitimized.

¹² In 2011 the state of Oaxaca recognized the ethnic group “Afromexicanos” in its state constitution (Garcia M. 2011).