

# Call Them Morenos: Blackness in Mexico and Across the Border as Perceived by Mexican Migrants

by

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## Abstract

This article explores the negotiation of racial and ethnic categories across borders by exploring the meanings of Blackness for Mexican migrants living in two Midwestern cities. Data from in-depth interviews reveals that Mexican migrants reconstruct their ethnic identities in a new context by reaffirming the currency of the official ideology of *mestizaje*, or racial mixture, in referring to Blacks in Mexico but also to Black Americans. A key strategy migrants deployed in defining Black ethnic identity was the use of the term *moreno* (brown-skinned) instead of *negro* (black-skinned) within a framework of *mestizaje* rather than the bipolar White-Black binary prevalent in the United States.

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This essay will explore various ways in which Mexican migrants in the United States imagine and experience Blackness. Despite the centrality of the Afro-Mexican experience in the history of Mexico, racial discourse has invisibilized the Afro-Mexican's experience. Because African history and legacy are rarely taught in schools, and almost never represented in the mass media, few of my interviewees knew of the existence of Afro-Mexicans, not to mention of *pueblos negros* (Black villages) in the *Costa Chica* and in central Veracruz. This did not mean, however, that they had not encountered Blackness as a racial category in their lives. Interestingly enough, a crucial term in their racial discourse about African Americans and Blackness was that of *moreno*. While in Mexico the term *moreno* (designating brown skin) had long become synonymous to *mestizo*, in the United States it recovered its original connotation as a euphemism for Blacks. Because *moreno* had specific connotations of sameness in migrants' home country, however, their use of this term to refer to Black Americans triggers interesting ambivalences regarding their definition of self and other across the border.

The data I use in this essay was obtained through ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews that sought to understand the role of race in the Mexican migrant incorporation experience. This fieldwork was done from 2004 to 2006 in a Chicago Mexican neighborhood and also in Racine, Wisconsin. I selected the participants through a snowball sampling method, taking care to interview about the same number of men and women. I contacted these people through my work as a volunteer in a community organization in Chicago and through a Mexican migrant civic association in Racine. I did 30 taped in-depth interviews with individuals of various backgrounds, ages, genders, ethnic and racial ancestries who had lived different lengths of time in the United States. The taped interviews lasted between 2 and 3 hours in length. The migrants came from areas of traditional emigration in Western Mexico, but also from regions in the South and North that are now contributing greater numbers of migrants. Most of these migrants came from rural or small communities, rather than from large metropolitan areas (see Durand, Massey, and Zenteno 2001). Most of the interviewees (all the names are pseudonyms) were in their prime working age (18-40 years), from working class backgrounds, and held low paying jobs.

After a brief detour into the history of Afro-Mexicans, I highlight the place of Blackness in mestizaje discourse, and then I explore the meanings of Blackness as experienced and imagined by Mexican migrants while living in Mexico, and later, regarding their encounters with African Americans in the United States.

## **History and Presence of Blacks in Mexico**

In contemporary Mexico the history and the presence of Black Mexicans<sup>1</sup> is little known. Communities of significant populations of visibly partial African descendants exist in two regions of Mexico, one is known as the *Costa Chica* in the coastal areas of the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca facing the Pacific Ocean in southern Mexico and the other communities are in the central region of the state of Veracruz, in the Gulf of Mexico (Cruz-Carretero 2006; Lewis 2000; Vaughn 2005).<sup>2</sup> The ancestors of these Afro-Mexican populations date back mostly from the enslavement of people from Africa to New Spain, as Mexico was called under Spanish colonial domination, from 1521 to 1821. Historical research has documented that after the Spanish conquest, the drastic demographic decline of the indigenous population, estimated at 27,650,000 in 1519 to a mere 1,075,000 Indians in 1605 as a result of a series of epidemics, which led the colonists to adopt various measures to deal with the labor shortage, one included the importation of enslaved Africans (Palmer 1976: 2). Thereafter, the importation of the enslaved responded more to the expansion of the colonial economy and the consequent need for additional labor.

There seems no exact figure, but it is estimated that by the time slavery was abolished, in 1829, around 200,000 to 250,000 African-born enslaved persons had worked in New Spain (Aguirre Beltrán 1958: 8; Palmer 1976: 3).<sup>3</sup> These early Afro-Mexicans did not remain concentrated on the coast and the lower regions. As Brady (1965) and Aguirre Beltrán (1958) have shown, the African enslaved were dispersed throughout New Spain to fulfill the labor needs of the agricultural, textile, and mining industries and to perform a vast array of occupations in the urban centers:

The Black slave, during the colony, besides being destined to work in the sugar mills and haciendas of the hot lands, was also required to work... in all those places inland, in the highlands and the sierras, where there were mining operations, as well as in the obrajes [textile workshops] of the big cities. Black influence, in the biological as well as the cultural sense, was not limited to the narrow coastal areas: it was felt over the vital centers of a vast territory. (Aguirre Beltrán 1958: 9) [Author's translation]

Africans were present in all regions and economic sectors, but they became less noticeable over time because of the increasing miscegenation that characterized late colonial Mexico. In the case of the *Costa Chica* and Central Veracruz, however, there were lower concentrations of other racial and ethnic groups for the enslaved Black person enslaved to mix with; thus the appearance was that Blacks inhabited only these areas (Carroll 1995: 407).

While most people of African descent arrived in Mexico in bondage, it would be mistaken to assume that this was the only way they entered the national territory. Indeed, the abolition of slavery in 1829 by Afro-Mexican President Vicente Guerrero prompted many of the U.S. enslaved to escape and cross the border with their southern neighbor. Hence, their numbers grew to about 4,000 during the 1840s and 1850s. The Mexican government welcomed these fugitives with the interest of forming alliances with them in the territorial struggles at the border with the United States and with the hope that these maroons would help Mexicans fight the assaults of Indian raiders (Mulroy 1993: 61-89). As part of these efforts, the federal government gave land along the northern Mexican border (in the state of Coahuila) to many Black settlers. Additional settlements of U.S. Blacks were also allowed in various other cities and towns in Mexico (for instance, in Tlacotalpan, Veracruz) (Schwartz 1975: 39-42). But the fugitive enslaved population was not the only Blacks entering Mexico. At the end of the 1800s, Mexico also allowed the immigration of Caribbean Blacks to work in the construction of the Tehuantepec isthmus and the transoceanic railroad. During these years, thousands of Black Cubans also fled after the war of independence settling in states of southern Mexico such as Yucatán, Veracruz and Oaxaca.

Finally, U.S. Blacks also participated in the Mexican revolution, and in the 1940s some 300 African Americans lived permanently in Mexico City, while others lived in various other smaller cities and towns (Vinson III and Vaughn 2004b: 11-14). Clearly, people of African descent have entered and settled in Mexico continuously over the last centuries, although in smaller numbers than during the trans-Atlantic enslavement period.

## **Blackness in Mestizaje Discourse**

Blacks have played an important role in Mexico's history, but paradoxically, they have not been represented in the country's imagined community. Blackness is almost non-existent in the national discourses of belonging. After independence, in the early nineteenth century the concerns of the new country centered on creating a nation that, while emulating Europe, would integrate and unify the large *mestizo* and indigenous populations. But it was in the early part of the twentieth century, after the revolution, that the cult of *mestizaje* bloomed. Reacting to Eurocentric white racism and a concern for social justice, revolutionary politicians and intellectuals promoted a positive valuation of the *mestizo*. Thus, the product of the racial mixture of Spaniards and indigenous peoples, the *mestizo* became the symbol of the new nation. In the exaltation of the *mestizo*, the Indian played a central role. No longer was the latter viewed as a primitive element of the nation, but as a group that needed protection from exploitation and non-coercive integration into the new state.<sup>4</sup> The cult of the *mestizo*, however, obliterated Blackness.<sup>5</sup> For instance, famous intellectual José Vasconcelos ([1925] 2007) theorized the emergence of a new syncretical race as an alternative to theories of White supremacy. But in his description of the cosmic race, he reproduced racist stereotypes that privileged Whiteness. In his view, Blacks were "thirsty of sensual joy, immersed in dances and unbridled lust", while Whites offered their "clear minds... that resemble their skin and their dreams" (p. 18).<sup>6</sup> Blacks would be erased from discussions of *mestizaje*, while Whites would remain a somatic ideal of beauty and excellence.

As noted above, people of African ancestry mixed with the much larger Creole and *mestizo* populations to a point that according to some authors, by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the process of miscegenation had been complete and Blacks became undistinguishable from *mestizos* (Carroll 1995; MacLachlan and Rodríguez 1990: 222).<sup>7</sup> The same process of miscegenation, both biological and cultural, is evident in relation to indigenous peoples (Knight 1990:73-74), yet the Indian presence and culture is not considered completely diluted in *mestizo* Mexico. Certainly, the prominent place of the Indian in the *mestizaje* narrative is due to their larger share of the population in the history of Mexico, but also to their historical construction as a racial inferior group *vis-à-vis* Spanish Europeans.

Blackness, however, was not embraced at all. Only recently has there been a revalidation of Afro-Mexicans' heritage in national discourse. A good example of this new tendency is the foundation in the 1990s of a publicly funded program to support the study of Afro-Mexicans titled *Nuestra Tercera Raíz* (Our Third Root) (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México 2007). While laudable, the re-inscription of Blacks into the nation has not been unproblematic because the recovery of this forgotten root is predicated upon the need to complicate, and not necessarily to question, the notion of *mestizaje* as the nation's racial paradigm that while it promotes the *mestizo*, it also upholds an aesthetic preference for white skin, and a rejection of the Black phenotype (Sue 2009).

It is difficult to think of Blacks in Mexico outside the discourse of *mestizaje*, something that is particularly clear in the use of the term *Afromestizo*, first advanced in the 1940s by anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán (1946; 1958), a pioneer in the study of Blacks in Mexico. Like its increasingly popular counterparts, White *mestizo* and *Euromestizo*, *Afromestizo* is an analytical (*etic*) category stemming from the need to pinpoint the racial origins and different "degrees of racial equality" enjoyed by individuals similarly labeled *mestizos*. The problem is that the category *Afromestizo* is not an insider's concept (*emic*) and does not resonate in the identity discourses of people of African descent.<sup>8</sup> The following extract of an interview by Marcus Jones (Jones and Rowell 2004) from the literary journal *Callaloo* with Miguel, an inhabitant of African descent in Coyolillo, central Veracruz, illustrates this point:

Jones: Do many people here accept their origins as *Afromestizo*?

Miguel: What is that?

Jones: People of African descent whose ancestors were slaves whose descendants mixed with Spaniards and Indigenous people.

Miguel: Yes, the majority of the people here would agree with that. They say that people from Africa arrived here and they stayed here. We descended from those people. (P. 11)

For Miguel and other people of the *Costa Chica*<sup>9</sup> and central Veracruz, regions with a strong presence of people of African descent, other categories such as *moreno* (dark skinned person) seem more useful as self-ascribed identity markers (Lewis 2000; 2001; 2012; Vaughn 2005). Probably derived from the Latin *Maurus*, an inhabitant of Northeast Africa, the term *moreno* was already used in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to refer to individuals of "dark color" (Corominas 1973: 403-404).

In colonial Mexico, as the participation of Blacks in the army became more urgent in the eighteenth century, soldiers of African descent were euphemistically called *morenos* so they could be admitted to an institution that usually banned persons of African descent (Aguirre Beltrán 1946: 173; Katzew 2004: 44). In contemporary Mexico *moreno* denotes a person of dark hair or skin color without necessarily implying African descent. Moreover, *moreno* is the epitome of *mestizo*, the symbol of post-revolutionary Mexico.

The success of the national strategy of *mestizaje* means that Mexicans, regardless of ancestry, see themselves as the product of mixture, often embodied in the *moreno* skin color. Lewis (2000; 2001; 2012) has found that by referring to themselves as *morenos*, rather than as Blacks, people of African descent in *Costa Chica* adopted a racial denomination that has become central to the hegemonic construction of Mexicaness and national belonging. This phenomenon is hardly surprising, for identities are imposed from the outside, prominently by the state, but they are also assumed and reconstructed as part of a collective action and claim making. Since there were no political and social incentives to adopting a Black identity, people of African descent thus chose to refer to themselves first and foremost as *morenos*, as Mexicans (*Ibid.*). Notably, most Mexicans use the term *moreno* rather than the term Black when referring to Afro-Mexican compatriots, and they may simply add the adjective dark and say *dark morenos*.

## **Encountering Blackness in Mexico**

Despite the centrality of the Afro-Mexican experience in the history of Mexico, many of my migrant interviewees ignored it. As noted above, hegemonic discourses about the nature of Mexicaness have obliterated African people and history. Most of my respondents who encountered Blacks or reflected on the category of Blackness in Mexico made sense of these within this hegemonic framework.

Race and racism connote processes of boundary making that rely on constructing and representing the self and the other (Sanders 2002:327). When I asked my informants whether they had encountered Black people in Mexico, they used this relationality in their accounts of such encounters. My informants expressed either a sense of similarity with Afro-Mexicans and/or a sense of difference that relied on distinguishing *moreno* Mexicans from African Americans. In particular, for some Indigenous interviewees the *morenos* they mentioned were assumed equal members of the Mexican nation and were not considered Black. For these interviewees having a Black identity put forward a clearly racial meaning linked to the new people, African Americans, they encountered in the United States.

Some Indigenous respondents described their encounters with Blacks using the two approaches, either signaled their similarity to the rest of Mexicans or stressed their difference or foreignness. The indigenous respondents come from a large region where the *Costa Chica* is located, so that they encountered or heard of Afro-Mexicans while living in this area. The *mestizo* respondents who encountered Blacks in Mexico could not specify whether these were Afro-Mexicans or foreigners but simply assumed they were outsiders. These *mestizo* respondents lived in central and western Mexico, regions with not significant Afro-Mexican populations. The two Afro-Mexican women I interviewed were from a coastal city in the southern state of Guerrero, adjacent to the *Costa Chica*, and acknowledged both Blackness and mixture in the history of Mexico as well as in their lives. These Afro-Mexican women's comparisons with African Americans did not express a sense of difference from them but one of similarity and of shared experience.

Three persons of Indigenous descent from Oaxaca indicated clearly this sense of similarity and shared identity with Afro-Mexicans, who they termed *morenos* rather than Blacks. Miguel, a Zapotec in his mid-thirties, stated that he had classmates who were *morenos* from the coast and that they were "just like us, those people from there [in the coast are], just like us." Gloria, twenty-one years old and self-identified as Zapotec, indicated that "In Oaxaca [there are] *morenitos* (little dark-skinned persons)<sup>10</sup> who are from the coast [... and] *morenitos* who are *morenitos* because of the sun, but they are not of pure race." Similarly Ramiro, also of Zapotec ancestry, who is 50 years old, put it this way:

[There are Black people] in the *Costa*, but they are Black. But they are not of the style of the Blacks from here [the United States]. I mean, they are normal Blacks. I mean, they have the same physical characteristics as us but in Black. Here [in the United States] a Black is distinguished by the mouth, the nose, by, well, being of another race. When I was a soldier in the army there were several *morenos*, from several parts of the republic. And from that part [*Costa Chica*] there are *morenos*. ...I did not think of anything; I mean, it was normal. They just were of another color, *moreno*. ...they are not Blacks completely, they are more *morenos* than us. More *morenos* but they are not completely of the Black race.

*Moreno* identity for these people of Zapotec ancestry is contrasted to Blacks from the United States. Ramiro says *morenos* and Blacks form two distinct races. It is in reference to African Americans that these respondents clearly articulated a sense of otherness. Miguel, for instance, when comparing *morenos* from Mexico with *morenos* from the United States, affirmed their difference in a racist language with Social Darwinist overtones. Referring to Charles Darwin's evolutionary theories (which state "that we come from the monkey"), Miguel suggested that African Americans occupy a lower position in human evolution, though he later admitted he did not know much about Blacks in the United States: "I did not interact with them, but they did not behave badly either. I mean, they never did anything to us."

Still some interviewees expressed their sense that Afro-Mexicans *were* different from most Mexicans. For Joaquín, also of Indigenous ancestry, Mexican *morenos* were considered different from the rest of Mexicans in the way they talked, and in this sense, Afro-Mexicans were more akin to African Americans:

Exactly in the same coarse way that [African Americans] talk, so do they [Blacks from the *Costa Chica*] talk there. Well, but it is their style of talking of those people, all right? I don't mean that they are rude when they speak because they purposely want to be rude with people. Rather, they talk that way because they are raised that way and that is what they learn.

Another way of talking about Blackness in Mexico for migrants who encountered Black people there was by talking about foreigners. Since there has been Cuban migration to Mexico at different times in history, it was common to hear that the Black people one may encounter in Mexico were all Cubans. Thus, many Afro-Mexicans were probably taken as Cubans and considered foreign. Several individuals I interviewed who were *mestizos*, such as Araceli, a woman of thirty-one years old from a small town in Guanajuato, stated that the only Blacks they encountered in Mexico were foreigners. In Araceli's case, because she never approached the Black people she saw, it was not clear whether the Black people were actual foreigners; she simply assumed they were. Natalia, a 21-year-old woman from a rural town in Jalisco, also commented that when she still lived in her hometown some priests brought with them some *morenos*, she said: "Everybody stared at them [and people said]: this is the way *morenos* from the United States look like." Guillermo, a young man twenty-nine years old from Mexico City, was the only one recalling he had seen Blacks who were clearly not Mexicans. He stated these Blacks lived in communities of people from Namibia and Somalia and he met them because they went to a school of adult education that he also attended.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, two interviewees, sisters of Afro-Mexican descent from a town near Acapulco, Guerrero, expressed a sense of identity and sameness in relation to Blackness, but each did so in a different way. They both acknowledged the presence of people of African descent in Mexico and shared that they have Black ancestors who come from the *Costa Chica* area in the state of Guerrero. For Rita, born in 1960, Black people in Mexico are not "in a state of purity" since they have mixed throughout time. This is peculiar to Mexican history, she implied, because in the United States people are divided by race and have not mixed:

Over there in Mexico there are *morenos*... [who] look a little like [the *morenos* from the United States]. But one needs to take into account that throughout history, it is the same race we are talking about, right? It is only that they remained there [in Mexico]. ...I always thought that I was *mixteada* [*Spanglish* term for mixed], because my father I believe was of a Black race. Though I believe he was also mixed because he also had an uncle who had very light eyes and was *blanquito* [White]... My grandmother was *morena* and... my grandfather, I saw him in a photo, was not so *moreno*... But my grandmother was *morena*. *Se mixtearon* [they mixed]. I never met him, I only saw him in photos, he was very tall and slender, but not too Black. However, I had uncles that were really Black. ... I believe that if in Mexico there had been only Blacks, it would be like here, like the *morenos* from here [the United States]. Because over there [Mexico] there are also people similar [to the ones from here.] I think that they are from the same group as the Blacks from here [the United States], but [in Mexico] they scattered... Here there really are too many, lots [of Blacks], over there no. In reality [in Mexico] all the races are [simply] known as Hispanics, right? ...You know that you are a Mexican.

For Julieta, born in 1975, remembering her Afro-Mexican father brought memories of racism:

My father's family was *costeña* and *criolla*. My father's father was Spanish. My grandfather married a woman a little bit Indian. Over there, in my town... many people do not have my color, right? People are a little lighter. Thus ... *morenos* of my same color [are treated] as inferior. I would say, ...well, am I like people from the old times?... I would tell myself, well, maybe my father's family comes from there [Africa]... My friends from school... did not like me. They called me names, it seemed they rejected me. ...They called me the ugly Black. ...I felt very bad some times. I felt like discriminated... But over time, thanks to God, I have overcome it [though] I had developed a [psychological] complex about it. ...There are [also] persons who call you [Black] with affection... You know if [the name] is given with affection or wickedness.... I remember that when I was little people were racists toward me because of my color. There were some ladies that did not let me play with their children because I was very *morena*. And I know that there is a lot of racism [in Mexico].

For both Rita and Julieta their senses of identity –of who they are in relation to others– acknowledge Blackness as a constitutive part of themselves. An understanding of Blackness as difference was acute in Julieta, who suffered as a child for being “very *morena*.” Rita’s narrative, on the other hand, illustrates a peculiar, but effective, strategy that stresses difference but in a way that makes the Blackness of Afro-Mexicans less “other” and through mixture becomes Mexican –the central tenet of *mestizaje* discourse. While Afro-Mexicans and African Americans descend from the same group of people, she argues that African Americans have not mixed and therefore their Blackness is concentrated, undiluted. In contrast, Afro-Mexicans have scattered throughout the Mexican territory and this has diminished their numbers. Because African Americans have concentrated spatially, their numbers seem higher. In Rita’s narrative, her Blackness is mixed and as such is included in the Mexican nation.

## Encountering Blackness in the United States

Wherever they go, sooner or later, most Mexican migrants in the United States encounter African Americans and U.S. racial discourse about Blackness and Blacks. It is clear, however, that some Mexicans encounter discourses of Blackness prevalent in the United States even before they travel north, through the U.S. media and as return migrants tell stories about African Americans. For instance, Julieta of Afro-Mexican ancestry mentioned above, stated that when she arrived in the United States she was not surprised at seeing Blacks:

My sister and my brother-in-law, when they returned to Mexico, they would tell me that [in the United States] there are many *morenos*. And, I mean, I have a *moreno* family, dark, like this, but dark, very dark. And they would tell me: no, there [in the United States] there are *people like us*, they look like an uncle that we have, like uncle Alejandro. Yes there are. I knew of [the existence of Blacks in the United States]. And I saw movies as well.

Others, however, said that when they arrived in the United States, seeing African Americans caught their attention. For instance, Ramiro, one of the Zapotec men mentioned above, said that before coming to the United States he expected that all U.S. citizens would be blond: “[I expected] the *güeros*<sup>12</sup> all blond and green eyed. I never imagined that there were Black *gringos*. We have the stereotype [of *gringos*] as being blond and tall based of the tourists that go to Oaxaca.” However, initial surprise at seeing Blacks soon subsides and migrants get used to them, as Lucio, a man of *mestizo* and Zapotec ancestry told me. But if, at first, African Americans surprise Mexican migrants, why do the latter call them Morenos, why not Blacks?

## ***Morenos So We Don't Offend Them***

The work of drawing boundaries of self and other relies on constructing differences and similarities among people, but more importantly, on marking similarity from difference in an oppositional manner (Hall 1989). Part of this work is done by naming, a process that assigns meanings and values to a particular designation. Racial naming is not done in a vacuum but in social contexts where the drawing of boundaries helps sustain systems of social inequality (Ore 2000). Naming the other not only constructs the subject addressed with a particular name but also endows the name caller with a position of superiority. Often, naming implies forms of disparaging people that are expressed as euphemisms (e.g., diminutives). Some reasons for the use of euphemisms include the existence of: a) etiquette norms discouraging the application of certain terms for marginal groups,<sup>13</sup> b) egalitarian and non-discriminatory ideologies in liberal democracies upholding respect for human rights, and c) subordinated groups with the power to protest specific terms addressing them (Valentine 1998). In addition to the state, experts are one group granted the power to define others, but lay people, drawing on the “realism of common-sense” also construct names (ibid.). However, authoritative naming belongs to those with the power to make a name hegemonic.

Mexican migrants are not in a position of power or authority that may give them the ability to produce hegemonic names. Nonetheless, Mexican migrants adapt a term used in their country of origin (*moreno*) to refer euphemistically to a marginalized racial group, African Americans. In this naming, migrants often used diminutives that also worked as forms of euphemism.

I frequently heard people referring to African Americans as *morenos* (dark skinned), and *prietos* (dark, swarthy). But the term *moreno* was the one most commonly used. I kept asking people why they referred to African Americans as *morenos*, since the term *moreno* in Mexico does not necessarily coincide with the term Black. I asked why people did not simply call African Americans *negros* (which literally means Blacks). All migrants to whom I asked the question told me they named African Americans with the term *morenos* so as not to insult them. How come? I would ask. Their responses are encapsulated in Isaura's words:

[We call them *morenos*] because in English there is a word, that is “nigger”, that means something despicable. I think that they, when they hear that you are calling them *negros*, they think that you are saying that word in English, that is not the case. ...This is the reason my brother told me never to call them *negros*, because they may be offended by using this word. Yes, I have called them *morenos*. ...My family does not use the word *prietos*, but there are people who do. [They are called *prietos*] because of their color.

Thus, soon enough migrants living in the United States teach newcomers –and possibly relate to people they visit back in Mexico– what to call African Americans and the reasons why. Some variations of this response included using the term *moreno* but with a caveat –stating that they use it *de cariño* (with affection) or that *moreno* is better because the term avoids making African Americans “feel bad about themselves.” Another form of employing euphemisms to designate Blacks was using diminutives: *morenitos*, *negritos* (little Blacks). Valentine (1998) has noted that one reason for the use of euphemisms lays in the need to refer to discriminated groups “in a way that preserves the modernist promise of liberalism and egalitarianism... while continuing to ensure the discrimination of the marginal.” Some Mexican migrants understood this liberal and egalitarian ideology when they stated that their use of *moreno* instead of *negro* was due to the goal of “not to discriminate.” Another reason for the use of euphemisms refers to the power of discriminated groups to challenge names and labels applied to them (*Ibid.*). Mexican migrants acknowledged this possibility when they stated they used *moreno* as a type of strategy, so that Blacks would not understand migrants were talking about them, because the word *negro* would make them angry.

As I described above, the term *moreno* is very common in Mexico to describe skin color and to refer to *mestizos* in general. Afro-Mexicans call themselves *morenos* to signal their Mexicaness. Lucio, in his late fifties, of *mestizo* and Zapotec ancestry said the term *moreno* is used to refer to Black Mexicans and thus, it is normal that people also use it to refer to African Americans:

People call them *morenos* because in Mexico that is the custom, we don't say *negros*. We bring that [name] with us. In several parts of Mexico there are Cubans. In the Costa Chica in Guerrero and in Oaxaca there are Blacks, in Pochutla and Pinotepa, for example.

*Prieto* (dark), and *mayate* (dung beetle) were two other words used less often to refer to African Americans. These words, however, were open pejorative terms, not euphemisms (see also De Genova 2005: 196). What are the meanings and values related to the term *moreno*, the term most often used to refer to African Americans? And how is *moreno* used to draw boundaries of self and other among the Mexican migrants I talked with? I argued above that the word *moreno* when applied to Black Mexicans often signaled inclusion, but when migrants living in the United States call African Americans *morenos*, are they trying to include them as one of “us” too? By naming African Americans *morenos*, migrants are merely attempting to avoid using race as a marker in language. Their use of *moreno* as an euphemism for Blacks may be due to norms of language etiquette among Mexicans, egalitarian ideologies, and the power of contestation of African Americans.

As the interviewees expressed above and as De Genova (2005: 196) has also suggested, the term *moreno* is useful because it avoids confrontations with Blacks and it conceals comments about Blacks when these are present. De Genova calls the use of the term a collective strategy to conceal racial discourse (*Ibid.*; see also Sue 2009).

Mexicans in the United States have learned of the stigmatized position of Blacks and of the importance of not being racist. Therefore, Mexicans' strategy is to use what they consider as Mexicans a non-racial term. By using the diminutive form, *morenito de cariño* (with affection) they attempt to place themselves as benign speakers in a racialized landscape. However, in their use of *moreno* as a generic name for a people, Mexican migrants cannot fully escape fixing the term as a racial category, especially when the term is deployed in discourses that negatively generalize about a group of people. Moreover, Mexican migrants' recourse to these naming practices may be prompted by a desire to position themselves higher than African Americans in the racial hierarchy of the United States.

## Concluding Remarks

Hegemonic discourses about the nature of Mexicaness have obliterated the African experience to a point that Black Mexicans are not represented in the discourse on *mestizaje*, nor are they visibly included as Black in the imagined community of the nation. Most of my respondents made sense of their encounters with Blacks in Mexico within this hegemonic framework, by signaling the latter as similar to the rest of Mexicans and thus including them in the nation, but at the same time invisibilizing the specificity of Afro-Mexican experience. Some of the Indigenous people I talked with described their encounters with Afro-Mexicans within this narrative framework. It is possible this was due to a greater contact with and awareness of Afro-Mexicans, since they lived in the region comprising the *Costa Chica* –an area with Afro-Mexican inhabitants. The *mestizos* who reported encountering Blacks in Mexico seemed not to be aware of the existence of Black Mexicans, they also inhabited regions with no significant Afro-Mexican presence. These *mestizo* migrants simply assumed all Blacks to be foreigners –usually Cubans. The two Afro-Mexican women I interviewed acknowledged both Blackness and mixture in the history of Mexico as well as in their lives. These Afro-Mexican women's comparisons with African Americans never expressed a sense of differentiation with them but one of similarity and of shared experience.

In their encounters with African Americans, Mexican migrants *adapted* hegemonic racial discourses about Blackness in the United States to their own understandings of race brought from Mexico, imbued with the notion of *mestizaje*, but without questioning prevalent racial hierarchies. One singular expression of this adaptation relates to the way Mexican migrants name African Americans.

Mexican migrants call African Americans *morenos* because, they say, they do not want to insult them by calling them *negros* which, they claim, could be misinterpreted as saying *niggers*. It is precisely this act of naming that showed Mexicans' recourse to their homegrown way of understanding race and Blackness within a framework of *mestizaje* as inclusion rather than one of bipolarity as exclusion (White versus Black). By calling them *morenos*, Mexicans seem to normalize and include Blacks in their world (e.g., "People call them *morenos* because in Mexico that is the custom, we don't say *negros*") and by using the diminutive form, *morenito* (e.g., "we say *morenos de cariño*," with affection), migrants seemed to say they tried to diminish the social stigma attached to Blackness. This recourse to a discourse of apparent inclusion and linguistic euphemism, however, could not conceal the hegemonic discourse that praises Whiteness and excludes Blackness and the compliance with the existing racial hierarchies and inequality in the United States. Euphemism, a strategy to conceal racial discourse that disparages Blackness, was prompted by language etiquette among Mexicans (who preferred to use indirect terms); egalitarian ideologies in the United States (that oppose discrimination), and the power of subordinated groups (African Americans) to contest naming.

For Mexicans the work of drawing boundaries between themselves and African Americans in the United States included not only naming strategies but also stereotyping, warnings against interbreeding and mixing, and avoidance of interaction with them, or social distancing practices. Mexican migrants seem to follow in the steps of earlier European immigrants to the United States who distanced themselves from African Americans in order to achieve Whiteness (Ignatiev 1995; Jacobson 1998; Roediger 1991; Roediger and Barrett. 2002). But unlike European immigrants, Mexicans encounter structural conditions that limit their economic, social, and political incorporation and upward mobility in the United States.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I chose to use interchangeably the terms Black Mexicans and Afro-Mexicans. These terms are most commonly employed by scholars and activists (Hernandez 2004); some also use the term *Afromestizo* (Aguirre Beltrán 1946). As I mentioned before, many people of African descent in Mexico prefer to call themselves *moreno* (dark), rather than Black (Negro) as reported by Lewis (2000) in her research in San Nicolás Tolentino, in the *Costa Chica*. Vaughn (2005) reports similar self-identification practices. Blacks

<sup>2</sup> According to information from the Oaxacan government the communities of significant *Afromestizo* population include the districts of Jamiltepec and Juquila. In lesser proportion, *Afromestizos* inhabit also the Cuicatlán, Pochutla, Juchitán and Tuxtepec districts. The municipalities with greater Black presence include San José, Estancia Grande, Santo Domingo Armenta, San Juan Bautista Lo de Soto, Santa María Cortijos and Santiago Tapextla. Communities whose populations have “mulatto features” (sic) include Mártires de Tacubaya and Santiago Llano Grande. In some Mixtec communities there is strong *Afromestizo* presence such as Santiago Jamiltepec, Santa María Huazolotitlán, San Andrés, Huaxpaltepec and Santiago Tututepec. Finally, in Pinotepa Nacional and Tututepec, which are *mestizo* municipalities, there is also an Afro-Mexican presence (Gobierno del Estado de Oaxaca 2005). In the state of Guerrero the communities with significant Afro-Mexican population include: Cerro del Indio, Cuajinicuilapa, Maldonado, Montecillos, El Pitayo, Punta Maldonado, San Nicolás, El Cacalote, Cerro de las Tablas, Copala, Azoyu, Banco de Oro, Barra de Tecoanapa, Huehetan, Juchitán (Aguirre Rivero 2006). In the state of Veracruz the communities with Afro-Mexican populations include: El Coyolillo, Yanga, Tamiagua, Alvarado, Mandinga, and Tlacotalpan, (Rowell 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Other scholars offer higher figures. Vinson III and Vaughn (2004b: 11) state that in the first century after the conquest alone, from 1521 to 1640, approximately 200,000 African enslaved were imported while Vincent (1994: 257) proposes that by 1810 between 300,000 to 500,000 enslaved Africans had been introduced into the colony. In addition, the enslaved from Asia (*esclavos de oriente* or *sangleyes*) were brought via the Galleon of Philippines that started to arrive regularly to Acapulco on the Pacific coast of Mexico in the last decade of the sixteenth century. These enslaved Asian were from all the countries of Asia and Indonesia. As with the slave trade from Africa, the trade from Asia was also a response to the need of additional labor in colonial Mexico (Aguirre Beltrán 1946: 41-44).

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About 600 enslaved Asians entered Mexico every year during the seventeenth century (MacLachlan and Rodríguez O 1990: 222). Interestingly, Vincent (1999) states that these Asian enslaved were catalogued as Black so that they could be traded: “Since the law decreed that only Africans could be slaves, and the Spanish wanted more slaves, the Asians were declared Africans. Most were dark, having been captured in parts of Asia where people are dark complexioned, such as Malaysia, New Guinea, and the southern Phillipine Islands, including the island of *Negros*, so named because the *Negritos* lived there.”

<sup>4</sup> The task of building the state and reconstructing the economy involved incorporating the country’s population as citizens who could work, pay taxes, and pay allegiance to the nation. For government officials, intellectuals, and anthropologists this task necessitated more than anything, the integration of Indians. State officials and intellectuals sought a non-coercive incorporation that respected Indian culture but this official rhetoric could not change racist attitudes in daily practice and assimilation was generally forced (Knight 1990:80-81).

<sup>5</sup> Not only was Blackness marked for exclusion, Chinese immigrants who had settled in northern Mexico were heavily persecuted and deported *en masse* (Knight 1990, Rénique 2003).

<sup>6</sup> “*ávido de dicha sensual, ebrio de danzas y desenfrenadas lujurias*”; “*la mente clara del blanco parecida a su tez y a su ensueño.*” (Vasconcelos [(1925) 2007: 18). Because Vasconcelos theorized the emergence of a cosmic race, not of a *mestizo* race as it is commonly assumed, he was interested in “including” Blacks in the national melting pot, but the aim was to produce a “better race”.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, Carroll (1995) has argued that evidence from colonial records of the local population of Veracruz shows that during the colonial period, Africans had mixed significantly with the *mestizos*. They also mixed with the Indigenous and Spanish populations but in lesser degrees. Most importantly, Carroll affirms that it is thanks to Afro-Mexicans that *mestizaje* took place, since these were very successful in “overcoming the resistances of Whites and Indians to the social and cultural integration of the races” (p. 433).

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<sup>8</sup> In the last few years, however, groups of Afro-Mexicans have assumed a Black identity as a result of grassroots mobilization. One example is the activist group Mexico Negro. Under the leadership of Father Glynn Jemmot, Afro-Mexicans representing settlements of *pueblos negros* (Black villages) in Oaxaca and Guerrero have met since 1998 in different villages of the *Costa Chica* of Oaxaca to discuss the origin and history of their communities, to reinforce their Black identities, and to push for the recognition of Blacks within the nation.

<sup>9</sup> Translated literally as Small Coast. The *Costa Chica* is in the Southwestern Pacific coast of Mexico and comprises the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca.

<sup>10</sup> Diminutives are very common as terms of endearment, contempt, or to indicate the small size of a quality. Gloria's use of *morenitos* here refers to the latter meaning, to diminish the quality of Blackness. This linguistic practice is common in relation to Blackness (e.g., *morenitos*, *negritos*, *prietitos*) among the Mexicans I talked to. The diminutive is also used to refer to Whiteness (e.g., *güerita*, *blanquita*), but I did not hear it much to refer to White Anglo Americans (e.g., *güeros*, *Americanos*, *gringos*, *gabachos*). I discuss the use of euphemism in the next section.

<sup>11</sup> It seems there are cases of Somali refugees living temporarily in Mexico. Peter Mumba (2006), a permanent secretary of the Zambian Ministry of the Interior, has stated that there are Somali refugees who are "using Zambia as a stepping-stone to filter into South Africa before negotiating their way onto Mexico-bound ships. Once in Mexico, they can easily walk into the USA [United States of America] as their final destination."

<sup>12</sup> *Güeros* or *güeras* are names that many of my interviewees and Mexican migrants use to refer to White (usually blond) U.S. Anglo Americans. Mexican migrants also use the names *gringo/a* and *Americano/a*.

<sup>13</sup> Valentine (1998) states that "euphemisms are encouraged in a society where politeness is highly valued, where indirect reference is considered a sign of good taste, and where direct reference can be embarrassing." This description can also be applied to Mexican society.

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