

'I Am Not the Mulata de Córdoba': The Cultural Meaning of Blackness in Nineteenth-Century Mexico¹

by

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Through complex cultural processes that took over two centuries to play out, La Mulata de Córdoba, with a tenuous basis in an actual historical figure or amalgam of figures, has earned iconic status in contemporary Mexican folklore. La Mulata has captivated the popular imagination and the interest of scholars of literature and history, as well as inspired artists and composers for at least two centuries. Luis Martínez Morales writes that “‘La Mulata de Córdoba’ is the Mexican legend that has had the most presence in our literature. Its story, like the beauty that is attributed to the character, has seduced, in the span of the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries, more than one Mexican writer.”²

Appealing to rich and poor alike, hers is not simply a tale about a clever and defiant *mulata*, a woman of Spanish and African ancestry who stood at the intersection of colonialism and modern nationhood and defied the old world powers that sought to contain her. Indeed, she is extraordinary not only for her trajectory, which can be traced back to the nation-building era of nineteenth century Mexico, but also for the role she continues to play in Mexico’s cultural framing as a *mestizo* nation today.

While the earliest written accounts of La Mulata de Córdoba were published in the early nineteenth century, these texts place her as having lived in the seventeenth century. Lacking any seventeenth-century historical evidence of her actual existence, a few questions beg to be answered: how did an alleged seventeenth-century figure capture the imagination of nineteenth-century Mexicans? More importantly, what role did this *mulata* figure play in the development of a contested national identity?

La Mulata gained popularity because she served so well as a vehicle for the aspirations of a diverse Mexican population seeking to create a new society. In particular, she became a singular medium for the development and dissemination of Mexico's national racial discourse, playing a critical role in the complex processes that came to define Mexican national identity as "mestizo," exclusive of blackness. Her status as a *mulata* was a reminder of Mexico's racial past, distinct from a future that would be characterized by the inexorable move away from a multi-racial identity to one that focused on *mestizaje*. Nineteenth century stories place La Mulata's blackness within a mystical space and time that, logically, had to be overcome or transcended in order for Mexico to evolve into its modern self. As described by Eva Allegra Raimon in her book, *The "Tragic Mulatta" Revisited: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Antislavery Fiction*, La Mulata is "a liminal figure ... well situated to reveal writers'—and therefore the culture's—conflicted visions of national and racial exclusion and belonging."³

As one of the few Afro-Mexican figures to have persisted for centuries, this liminal figure between colonial and modern Mexico helped to promote a "negation through omission of the existence of many other cosmovisions in Mexico, [...] cosmovisions such as those of racially mixed people, of the diverse first nations, of the diverse African and Asiatic cultures."⁴ Nineteenth-century Mexicans were more than comfortable appropriating La Mulata and thus homogenizing blackness by reducing it to the personification of *one* mulata. Even as her story recounted Mexico's colonial black presence, it did so as much to isolate, or rarify, that presence as to depict it.⁵ An example of this process of "negation through omission" is the curious fact of her missing "name."

In none of the accounts is La Mulata de Córdoba ever attributed with a proper name. Meanwhile, her moniker, which also functions as badge of her African origin or ancestry, takes the place of an actual name. While "mulata," clearly calls attention to a distinct racial background, it also reminded nineteenth-century audiences that Mexico's history of slavery, and the black racial mixture that came with it, was safely contained in the distant past. There was room, and indeed, the need for such a *black* character, but she served a clear purpose. Through an analysis of La Mulata, we can examine the role that race played in the "contested ideological terrain of interraciality and nationhood."⁶ La Mulata's blackness, and blackness in general, lay only in the discourse of this one character that belonged to another era.⁷ At the same time, by using the term "Mulata" as a noun, Mexicans have ensured that her blackness cannot be erased from historical memory and one might even say that through her institutionalization and popularization La Mulata has succeeded in defying attempts to contain blackness within Mexico's historical past or to simply erase blackness from Mexico's national identity.

The first critical step in the institutionalizing and eventual popularizing of this character was the manner in which La Mulata migrated from the outskirts, both geographically and culturally, towards the center of a national life and the imagining of a Mexican identity. She is said to have been “born” or to have originated in Córdoba, outside of Mexico City, yet she eventually becomes strongly associated with the capital, the cradle of federal government and home to most of the nineteenth century’s prominent scholars. Not only were Córdoba and Mexico City connected geographically, via the Royal Highway, during the colonial period slave uprisings in the former city created concern for authorities in the capital. Moreover, Córdoba is where Mexican independence was declared, ushering the nation to a new era, while Mexico City served as the center of national development and discourse.

The legend that has intrigued so many artists, intellectuals and audiences is the story of a sixteenth- or seventeenth-century woman living in Córdoba, Veracruz, who is accused of being a witch. Bridget Christine Arce writes, “legends, witchcraft, and myth: the hallmarks of what is left of the African legacy in Mexico since emancipation.”⁸ She is a mulata whose parents people know little about, except that one of them was black. Naturally, the Inquisition has her arrested for witchcraft. One day, she points to a charcoal drawing of a ship she has made on the wall of her cell and asks the jailer what detail he thinks is missing from the drawing. He replies that it is not missing anything because it is perfect, and so, the only thing missing is for it to sail away. At this point, La Mulata jumps onboard the ship and sails away, leaving the jailer dumbfounded. Today, various versions continue to be refashioned from these primary details. The *Diccionario geográfico, histórico, y biográfico de los estados unidos mexicanos* (1890) states that the story of La Mulata is a memory of a character that is passed on from generation to generation and cannot be confirmed.⁹

What the different accounts of “La Mulata de Córdoba” have in common is the authors’ conflicting attitudes towards this character. She is both kind and spiteful. She attends mass and is charitable at the same time that she is entangled in a relationship with the devil; she is a victim of the Inquisition’s persecution and a victim of her own arrogance; she is a woman to be admired and feared; to be desired and repudiated. What they all agree on is her remarkable beauty.

Perhaps the most interesting development of the story is that the first written account by José Bernardo Couto is quite distinct from what it has become today. The first written account of La Mulata's legend appeared in 1837 in the newly-released literary newspaper, *El Mosaico Mexicano* with the title “Historia de un peso.” The same story appears four years later in *Calendario de las señoritas mejicanas*, also with the same title.¹⁰ Coutos’ version stands out as the most singular of all the versions, in part because Couto’s female character, unlike in subsequent versions, is never identified as a mulata, but rather an “*Hechicera*,” which much like her later title, stands in place of a real name.

Couto's story begins where subsequent literary versions preferred to end. The story begins with "a famous *hechicera* from Córdoba" already jailed in Mexico City, having been arrested by the Inquisition for performing witchcraft.¹¹ One day she asks her jailer what is missing from, or lacking in, the ship that she has drawn on the wall with charcoal. He responds that the ship only lacks the ability to sail. "La Hechicera," replies that if he wishes, it shall sail, at which point she jumps "onto" the drawing of the ship. The guard is left shocked when the ship begins to sail away with the woman right before his eyes. According to Couto's story, the authorities lose all track of the woman, but a rumor quickly circulates that she had sailed out of her cell, across the Pacific Ocean and within a few hours had landed on dry land. Couto reports that Mexican demographers attempted to determine her whereabouts, but failed. From here, Couto's story brings us to the present. At some point the "wizard from Córdoba" returned to Mexico to quietly take up residence in the capital again. Couto writes that the woman was not in the habit of performing sorcery, "nor is there any historical or traditional news that she had caused fright to any Christian, except the jailer."¹² But it is exactly for that reason that news has now resurfaced about her. One day, she performed a bit of harmless witchcraft in front of another person who had a *peso* in hand and wondered out loud how many owners it had had. "La Hechicera" answered, "it should not be difficult for me to guess, and better yet, make that same peso tell it to us." Then, with the wave of her hands and the uttering of "cabalistic" words, the *peso* jumped up speaking, and after being ordered to tell its story proceeded to tell the lengthy tale of its so-called life.¹³ As the title of Couto's story suggests, this is indeed the story of a *peso*, as much as that of the *hechicera*. The story ends when "La Hechicera" senses someone approaching and, with a cautionary, "hush!" returns the *peso* to its original form.¹⁴

By the turn of the century, Couto would be recognized as one who "belonged to that notable group of individuals who at the current mid-century distinguished themselves through their services to the homeland."¹⁵ Born on December 29, 1803, Couto studied in Orizaba, Veracruz, approximately twenty kilometers from Córdoba, before going to Mexico City to continue his education.¹⁶ At the age of 25, Couto began his political career as a Deputy of the Veracruz legislature and a key participant in the negotiations between Mexico and the United States that fashioned the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo at the end of the "US Intervention."¹⁷ His role in politics and literary circles brought him in contact with influential men, including Orozco y Berra, with whom he collaborated on the *Diccionario Universal* (1853-1856), which contained the appendix entry for "La Mulata de Córdoba."¹⁸

In the appendix to his famous mid-nineteenth-century *Diccionario Universal* (1856), Manuel Orozco y Berra included an entry for "Mulata de Córdoba" which refers to her as an "*hechicera*," who "could, at her desire, make strange shapes, command the elements, and disturb the laws established by nature."¹⁹ Orozco y Berra suggests that the story might be based on a woman accused of witchcraft by the Inquisition in the sixteenth century who, through some miraculous occurrence, managed to escape the cruel fate of the majority of the accused.

He also suggests that, more than a mere story, by 1856, *La Mulata* had entered Mexican vernacular. People who wished to express the improbability of accomplishing or finishing something would express that sentiment by stating “I am not the *Mulata de Córdoba*.”²⁰

At the time that the *Diccionario*'s appendix was released in 1856, Couto's version was the only known published account of *La Mulata*'s story, and his version did not carry the racialized signifier. She was a witch, a mysterious *hechicera*, but not a mulata. However, Couto's collaboration with Orozco y Berra on the *Diccionario* indicates three possible explanations for this subsequent racialization. First, Córdoba's history of slavery and racial mixture might have led people to conclude that the *hechicera*, who came from that region, according to Couto, was of African racial mixture. Second, the *hechicera* became linked with a mulata because of the tendency to associate women of African descent with witchcraft. Finally, it could indicate that this character originated in oral tradition and was fashioned after a real woman, or amalgam of women, from the colonial period whose triumph against the inquisition had become the subject of popular folklore.

Couto's attempt to transform the protagonist from *La Mulata* to *la hechicera de Córdoba* or simply, *La Cordobesa*, did not influence literary tradition, which stubbornly affirmed the signifier of the character's *mulatez*. Every nineteenth-century author to follow would make that detail a focal point of the story. In fact, today's readers will often find that in reproductions or references to Couto's seminal story, “*Historia de un peso*,” modern editors have replaced Couto's “*hechicera*” with “*La Mulata*”—as if the author had all along intended to name his character that way. For example, in his 1898 compilation of Couto's works, editor V. Agüeros added an explicit reference to her race in his edited version of “*Historia de un peso*.” Agüeros insert a line referring to “a famous *hechicera* (llamada *la mulata de Córdoba*).”²¹ It is an unusual bit of literary editing, for an editor or publisher to feel entitled to *re-name* the main character of another author's story. By 1898 there were already various printed versions of the tale, most of which, with the exception of Couto, named her as “*La Mulata*.” In effect, *La Mulata*'s “magic” turned out to be much more powerful than the might of the author's pen. Like the *peso* in Couto's story, “*La Mulata*” has been passed from author to author, pen to pen.

Manuel Ramírez Aparicio was the first author to construct the character into a *mulata* in 1861, henceforth giving her persona and story its definitive current shape. Ramírez Aparicio's version of *La Mulata* is a tale featuring the lives of common people, told for the instruction of the urban elite. As a ‘prequel’ to Couto's narrative, Ramírez Aparicio's version not only firmly affixes the title “*La Mulata*” to the protagonist of this tale, but also emphasizes the locale of Córdoba and the significance of the area's status as the periphery of ‘civilized,’ modern Mexico. Ramírez Aparicio's tale is also emblematic of a conflict that later authors would grapple with. The narrator laments that *La Mulata* does not exist in our own day to offer consolation and to remedy people's bodily and spiritual afflictions.²²

Conversely, her powers belonged to a “superstitious” era and, moreover, are clearly identified with a semi-wild place. Córdoba, to its own chagrin, still intimated wild, even dangerous places—caves hidden in the hills, mysterious mulatas with magical powers, and it stood in direct opposition of modernity.²³ La Mulata is both the protagonist who defies the inquisition and the antagonist who is closely associated with and is a direct product of a barbaric colonialism. Without quite ever naming it, Ramirez Aparicio, and other authors to follow, hint at Mexico’s struggle over the meaning of blackness and its place in the fabric of its post-colonial identity.

Ramírez Aparicio’s version begins in the mid-1800s, with the narrator directly addressing the readers, placing them in an urban scene, asking the reader if s/he has ever been privy to “...the amusing conversations of our poor people? For example, between a café waiter and a seamstress.”²⁴ It is a typical street scene—a young man wants to court a young woman and asks her on a date. The seamstress does not agree to meet with him because it is against the will of her demanding aunt. The waiter insists. Still, she refuses and then he begins to think that it is because she does not care for him, or worse, because she might be meeting with someone else.

The waitress replies, “nothing like that, but...”

“Admit that you no longer love me!”

“Nothing like that, but...”

“But what!?”

“You expect me to do the impossible! You are an imprudent one! I do not make miracles! Am I the Mulata de Cordoba?”²⁵

Now the narrator relates to the reader the story behind that popular phrase, “I am not the Mulata de Córdoba!”

Ramírez Aparicio’s version provides a host of details and nuances to the story of La Mulata leading up to her imprisonment by the Inquisitors. The narrator presents her as an object that had earned great curiosity and interest, one might even say she had earned a level of “fame” among the ordinary folk, the *pueblo*, not only for her magic, but for the curative, and consoling deeds she performed for her neighbors. She had been eternally youthful in appearance, never growing old. She lived in a cave in the wild, Cordoban hillside, area renown in colonial times as a refuge for escaped slaves. The most superstitious amongst the people swore that La Mulata had contact with beings from a mysterious and supernatural world, with which she had communication when she thought it best, discovering through them the secrets of the present and those of the future. Moreover, she possessed gifts that made her sought after as a universal remedy for the pains of the body and the afflictions of the spirit.²⁶

Everyone knew that to solicit her help, one only needed to invoke her presence and she would appear, offering her services to the petitioner. A woman could seek her services if she wanted to assure her boyfriend's fidelity, or a man could call upon her if he needed money to elevate his status as a potential suitor. "It is well-known," the narrator adds, that she once had an appointment in Córdoba and yet administered medicine to a sick person in the capital (Mexico City) at the exact same hour.²⁷ With this phrase, "it is well-known," Ramírez Aparicio implies that the story of La Mulata has been handed down through oral transmission, thus making it a tale of the pueblo. At the same time, he affirms that while part of oral tradition, La Mulata's tale is based on a historical figure. The narrator comments that there are few who have not heard the story of La Mulata and adds, "one must agree that her existence was a fact."²⁸

The narrator summarizes La Mulata's reputation as a "handkerchief for tears during the most trying moments," explaining that, "she was, in short, a woman whom antiquity would have placed among its goddesses, or at least, among its most venerated priestesses; she was a 'medium,' and of the most honored of the privileged that the spiritual school enjoyed in that era."²⁹ However, the Inquisition puts a stop to La Mulata's invaluable services to the people, which in the narrator's judgment, "was too sharp-sighted and superlatively materialistic." The narrator adds,

when such stupendous marvels reached its [the Inquisition's] ears, it smiled with disdain and nailed the magician with a snake's glance. Then it raised its hand with scorn, determined to seize on its prey. She snuck off with dizzying speed and traverses the sky triumphantly; but her pursuer was already prepared for this catch: it spreads its steel net in the air and...there was no escape, the Mulata was trapped in the mesh.³⁰

After she is jailed and fails, or refuses, to use her talents to escape, the pueblo who had once extolled her gifts, begin to doubt La Mulata's powers. In the end, La Mulata does save herself, aiming "to trick her guardians and leave the entire world dumbfounded."³¹ Here the story follows Couto's version of her magical nautical escape before the very eyes of her jailer. Like Manuel Orozco y Berra in *Diccionario Universal* (1856), Antonio García Cubas, points out in *Diccionario geográfico, histórico, y biográfico de los estados unidos mexicanos* (1890) that the sailing away on the boat, the famous question, "what is this boat lacking?" and its reply "only that it sail" are the lone characteristics that all of the nineteenth-century versions have in common.³²

Ramírez Aparicio's narrator ends the story with the line: "since that moment, La Mulata has disappeared forever."³³ Readers are left to wonder if it was the vindictiveness of the Inquisition or the faithlessness of the people themselves that chased La Mulata away. Ramírez Aparicio's statement of the disappearance of La Mulata is also a profound statement of Mexico's history.

Ramírez Aparicio's narrative does not permit its reader to imagine that La Mulata could ever exist anywhere but in the spaces of the historical imagination. In juxtaposing the failed tyranny of the Inquisition with the people's failure to "keep faith" with their own superstitiousness, the story suggests that both of these legacies of the past were, inevitably, meant to be overcome. More importantly, the *mulata* has "disappeared forever." Arce explains,

"Set sail." This answer operates as the final ingredient of the spell she has cast to escape, as it is at this precise moment that the spell becomes complete: the *mulata* sails off into the night, escaping her sentence, never to be heard of again. This ending releases her from her punishment, but also eliminates her presence from society.³⁴

Perhaps the note of affirmation at the equally inevitable loss of La Mulata sounds for the loss of blackness in the making of modern Mexican identity as well. The commonplace phrase derived from this tale, "*I am not La Mulata de Córdoba*" is an ironic reflection of the certainty of that loss, reinforcing the refusal to identify with blackness. In Ramírez Aparicio's story, no matter how much one may regret its loss, no matter what consolation or anxiety it may have afforded in the past, blackness has "disappeared forever" from Mexican identity.

Forty-seven years after Couto and twenty-three years after Ramírez Aparicio, Vicente Riva Palacio reintroduced La Mulata in *Tradiciones y leyendas mexicanas* (1884).³⁵ Riva Palacio followed much of the thread of his predecessor, Ramírez Aparicio, in "weaving" the story of La Mulata, but *formally* he departed dramatically from previous versions. Written in stanzas, Riva Palacio's version introduces La Mulata in verse:

More than two centuries ago there lived...

a beautiful damsel who carries
in her eyes the rays of the African sun
and with her bronze skin she is saying
that she is also of the white race.
No one ever knew her parents; but everyone
upon seeing her wavy hair,
the suppleness of her charming features,
and her undulating bosom and red lips,
La Mulata they call her, since they suspect
That she was daughter of [a] black woman and [a] Spaniard.³⁶

There is a strong suspicion that La Mulata is a witch. The town keeps a watchful eye for some proof of their suspicion or for a reason to turn her in to the authorities, but they have no proof. The mayor, Martín de Ocaña, an older man, with much authority and good reputation, does not want to believe, but also does not desist the rumors that she is a “wizard.”³⁷ The mayor, unable to overcome his passion, confesses his love to La Mulata, but nothing can convince her or inspire even a single smile of hope from her; not gifts, crying, nor promises. In addition to labeling her as a “witch” and a “wizard,” Riva Palacio refers to her as “hechicera” who would give the mayor no encouragement. He tries to forget her, but the more he tries to hate her the more he idolizes her. His passion for this woman is so strong that he no longer recognizes himself. He becomes convinced that the only solution to his condition is to denounce her to the Santo Oficio. In a written document, he explains the rumors that have been spread about town and his terrible state (of passion for this woman).³⁸ La Mulata hears the rumors around town and one day sees that mobs carrying torches have gathered in the central plaza. Men in horses head out towards her home. The mayor shows up one night with one hundred men and surround La Mulata’s house, asking her to surrender, but she sees them coming, wraps herself in a white cloak and goes outside where a tall man hiding beneath the “wide wings of a sombrero,” wearing a black cloak, waits with two horses. The two manage to make their way past the men.

With confused buzz they fill the forest,
From the mountains awakening the echo,
Thus ardently chasing her
Without a fixed direction or clear path
Go Don Martín and one hundred who accompany him.³⁹

At the moment when the men can see her cloak, when they think they have caught her and are close enough to touch her, a cloud of dust and confusion envelopes everything and she disappears. The mayor can hear her mocking laughter in the distance and that makes him even more determined to capture her. Morning comes in the jungle and the mayor finds himself alone wondering whether he should return to Córdoba or continue to chase La Mulata through the mountains. He decides to let his horse wander about when suddenly he finds himself facing La Mulata and the man in the black cloak, both of whom are sitting on a rock, side by side. La Mulata apologizes to the mayor for having wasted his time looking for her, but adds that even if he chases her for one year he will not catch her. She contends that it would be best for him to return to Córdoba, which he obeys.⁴⁰

Without telling the reader how, Riva Palacio mentions that La Mulata is finally captured and is put in a dungeon where no light ever enters and from which no one ever escapes. Priests claim that with persistence they can set her on the right path. In the meantime, the Inquisition has decided to burn her at the stake. La Mulata remains calm. One night she enjoys a pleasant dream of her home, Córdoba.

On another night a man comes to her cell. It is the chief Inquisitor himself, an old man, who has been coming to her cell for ten straight days, offering La Mulata freedom in exchange for her companionship. He professes his love for her and vows to take her away where no one will know her history or her name, and where they can live together in a palace, for he is wealthy. La Mulata replies, "I have already told you, sir, that I do not deserve so much dedication, nor should a noble man hold refuge in his chest for one who, since her infancy, has been helpless and poor."⁴¹ The Inquisitor insists that nothing matters except his love for her, but she cannot be convinced. She does not want to deceive him with false love, even at the cost of her freedom. Angered by her rejection, the Inquisitor vows that she will die. He is humiliated. As he begins to walk away from her cell, La Mulata yells back to the old man and says that if he answers one question correctly perhaps she will resign herself to him. Instantly, his demeanor changes and he eagerly agrees. She asks, "do you see this boat painted with charcoal and which appears to be ready to depart? What is it lacking?" The man stares at the ship and the more he stares at it the more he thinks it is perfect. Eventually he answers, "only for it to sail," to which she responds "not even that, sir," and with one leap La Mulata boards the ship and sails away.⁴² The tale ends with a note from the narrator, which states that, many years later, an old man in an insane asylum spoke of a ship that sailed beneath Mexico carrying a beautiful woman. This man, Riva Palacio reveals, was the old Inquisitor. La Mulata was never heard from again, but "it is assumed that, under control of the devil, she is moaning. Leave her among the flames readers!" the narrator finally warns, seemingly relieved to finally be rid of her.⁴³

Through his portrayal of La Mulata, Riva Palacio presents an elaborate and captivating portrayal of Córdoba and Mexico's anguished history of racial mixture and its potential for brewing powers capable of challenging the structures of authority of the state and the church, and even patriarchy. His version of "La Mulata de Córdoba" can be read as an attempt to wrestle with the historical legacy of the city of Córdoba as a key site for dealing with rebellious slaves and *cimarrones* (runaway slaves), which he himself wrote about in his historical masterpiece, *México a través de los siglos* (1884-1889), an ambitious history of Mexico consisting of five volumes. More than half a century after his grandfather, former President and Independence leader, Vicente Guerrero, officially abolished the institution of slavery in 1829, Riva Palacio uses the story of La Mulata to reenact familiar scenes of colonial authorities charging into the mountains and through the jungles near Córdoba to hunt down *cimarrones*.⁴⁴ La Mulata lived behind a "curtain of vegetation" in much the same way that *cimarrones* lived in the jungle. Córdoba, the home of La Mulata, is a "withdrawn place."⁴⁵ The specter of rebellious slaves, like that of La Mulata herself, Riva Palacio seems to be assuring readers, is locked safely in the past.

Of the many authors who reproduced "La Mulata de Córdoba," Luis González Obregón's (1865-1938) 1891 version is the one most referenced by subsequent writers. No single writer contributed to the development of La Mulata as a national character more than Luis González Obregón. In addition to serving as a literary scholar, historian, and respected public figure, González Obregón plays an interesting role in the dissemination of her story. It is his version of La Mulata's tale that is most widely referenced today.

González Obregón's version of the story is the first to be mostly set in Córdoba, while other authors only make reference to the location as a background. In a sense, Córdoba is a lead character itself in this tale. González Obregón's story begins with a description of agricultural products that are grown in Córdoba, primarily mangos and coffee. More importantly, whereas Riva Palacio forces readers to make the connection between Córdoba and slavery on their own, González Obregón paints a vivid picture of the founding of Córdoba as a consequence of slavery, from which La Mulata would have descended. "Córdoba was founded there in the first years of the seventeenth century," he writes, delving into the region's historical connection to slavery and slave revolts:

In that era, rebellious slaves prowled around Totulla, Palmillas, Totolinga and Tumbacarretas, putting the towns in continuous alarm, as they assaulted merchants, robbed passengers and were an obstacle for commerce and the Royal Hacienda by intercepting the road from Veracruz to the capital, [Mexico City].⁴⁶

To solve the problem, various prominent men from the neighboring town of Huatusco asked the Viceroy, Diego Fernandez de Córdoba, to be allowed to establish a town in that area. The town was founded on April 25 of the year 1618 and was named after the Viceroy himself. "Córdoba, after all, is full of historical memories," the narrator extols.⁴⁷

Continuing his elaborately detailed history of the town, González Obregón then jumps forward two centuries to praise the town's role in the fight for independence. "It opposed glorious resistance to the royalists," he says. It was also the place where Viceroy Juan O'Donoju and Independence leader Agustín de Iturbide signed the famous *Tratados de Córdoba*, which consummated independence.⁴⁸ González Obregón seals the importance of Córdoba, saying, "for its exuberant and virgin environment, for its origin and its historical memories, Córdoba is therefore a prominent and enchanting city..."⁴⁹ From here, the historical account takes an interesting turn towards the fabulous. In addition to its many virtues, the narrator underscores, Córdoba is perhaps better known as the homeland of La Mulata. "More than that," he writes, "in Córdoba is where a most beautiful woman was born, subject of a popular tradition."⁵⁰ González Obregón celebrates that "the fantastic legend of La Mulata de Córdoba has lived in the tradition of the people..."⁵¹ indicating that the character is a creation of the pueblo.

As in previous versions, though no one knew anything of her origin, the people called her La Mulata and believed her to be a witch who had made a pact with the devil who visited her every night. In González Obregón's tale, people who passed her house at midnight swear that they saw a sinister light come out through the cracks in the windows and door, as if a powerful fire devoured her bedroom.⁵² As in Riva Palacio's story, she bewitches all the young men who pursue her, arguing over who loves her the most, and she disregards them all. Her independence makes her the target of a rumor that her heart must belong to only one man: the lord of darkness.⁵³ Rumors quickly spread as well about her amazing healing and mystical powers.⁵⁴

González Obregón directly quotes an entire passage from Ramírez Aparicio in which the latter laments that *la Mulata* does not live in our time and comments that her virtues in another era would have caused people to think of her as a goddess.⁵⁵ “How long did the fame of that woman last, true prodigy of her era and admiration of future centuries? No one knows.”⁵⁶ She was persecuted, the narrator laments.

Her fate follows the now familiar pattern: she is taken from Córdoba to Mexico City to be tried by the Inquisition. The motivations of the Inquisition, González Obregón points out, are not clear, nor clearly “just.” When she arrives in Mexico City, one daring person maintains that she is not a witch at all, and accuses the Inquisition of wanting to abscond with her fortune consisting of ten large barrels full of gold. Another person comments that an unrequited love is the cause of her troubles.⁵⁷ Years pass and on the eve of her execution, it is rumored that “the bird,” referring to *La Mulata*, “had flown all the way to Manila” taunting the vigilance of her jailers; that she had walked out before the jailer’s eyes.⁵⁸ “What power did that woman have to mock the narrow vigilance of the very respectable inquisitor gentlemen,” asks the narrator. “Everyone ignored it [*La Mulata*’s escape]. The strangest and most absurd explanations circulated throughout the city.”⁵⁹ People would say, as they made the sign of the cross on themselves, the devil himself had walked in to take her away. Others speculated that the Inquisition had taken bribes and allowed her to escape. “Some remembered that *bribes open jails*, and even some malicious ones said: *love conquers everything*, and that the priests of the Santo Oficio, as mortals, were also just human.”⁶⁰ In the face of all of these rumors, González Obregón claims that he will reveal the truth to the reader. The story recounts the famous escape: her jailer marvels at a drawing of a ship that *La Mulata* has made on one of her cell walls. “What is this ship lacking?” she asks. He answers that it is perfect and that it only lacks the ability to sail, at which point she says she can change that, jumps onto the ship and sails away, leaving the jailer dumbfounded.⁶¹ Many years later, a “poet,” the narrator adds, would write that a man in an insane asylum spoke of a ship that one night sailed under the city carrying a woman of high arrogance.⁶² No doubt, González Obregón is referring to the poet, Riva Palacio.

González Obregón makes a powerful connection between the forces of evil: of the devil and of the Inquisition. It was rumored that either the devil helped *La Mulata* escape, or the Inquisition took bribes, and it mattered little which one it was because in the eyes of the people they were both the same. However, González Obregón suggests that he will tell the truth: that *La Mulata* used her own powers to escape, proving to be more powerful than the Inquisition or the devil himself.

In reference to González Obregón’s impact on Mexican society, Carlos G. Peña wrote that “no one before him had understood among us that History, more than in the big events, was found in the life, familiar and palpitating, of small events.”⁶³ In the late nineteenth century, González Obregón found the popular story of *La Mulata* particularly telling of those “familiar and palpitating” events that gave meaning to Mexico’s history.

He himself symbolizes Mexico's national history. According to Antonio Castro Leal, González Obregón did not believe that Mexico as a nation began in the nineteenth century with independence from Spain. He believed it began in the sixteenth century with the melding of the races that would lead to Mexican mestizaje. González Obregón was certain that since the sixteenth century there were "shouts of rebellion and independence, and that in the life and customs of the colonial centuries can be found antecedents of [Mexico's] psychology and statements of [its] nationality."⁶⁴ By detailing the founding of Córdoba, as opposed to focusing on La Mulata's last days in the Inquisition's jail cell in Mexico City, González Obregón made a strong connection between colonialism and the new nation and between Córdoba and Mexico City. More importantly, by expanding on the role of Córdoba and the history of slavery and of racial mixture González Obregón was, inadvertently, arguing for La Mulata's place, and the place of blacks and of black rebellion in the making of Mexico's history. While González Obregón glorifies the founding of Córdoba by a handful of gentlemen to put an end to the highway robberies by runaway slaves, he also clearly points out that Córdoba is full of "historical memories."⁶⁵ It is the home of many great men, including authors and scholars. But, González Obregón points out, "more than that, in Córdoba a most beautiful woman was born, subject of a popular tradition."⁶⁶ In other words, the role of this "most beautiful woman" in the historical memory of Córdoba is just as important as the founding of the town itself. Whereas Ramírez Aparicio juxtaposes Córdoba with Mexico City as a way of placing the former on the fringes of the modern nation, González Obregón places Córdoba and its history at the center. "For its unspoiled and exuberant landscape, for its founding origin, and its historical memories, Córdoba, then, is a charming and illustrious city..."⁶⁷ In González Obregón's version, Córdoba and La Mulata form a history that is integral to Mexican identity.

In the last year of the nineteenth century, one last author rewrote *La Mulata de Córdoba*. Originally published in late 1897 in Mexico City's newspaper, *El Imparcial*, Heriberto Frías's version would have been more accessible to general audiences. He begins his tale by mentioning that according to Luis González Obregón, Córdoba was the birth home of La Mulata. But here Frías points out that while González Obregón "makes La Mulata appear in Córdoba," other authors, Ramírez Aparicio, in particular, point out that it is in Mexico City where her exploits were ascertained.⁶⁸ Like other authors before him, Frías states that what is certain is that she was an "oracle for the superstitious people of her era," no doubt referencing the pueblo.⁶⁹ People spoke of her having connections to supernatural beings that gave her insight to the present and future. Others judged her for having direct contact with the devil himself, so much so that people assumed they were lovers. At the same time, not only was she exceptionally beautiful, she possessed "skills and abilities" that made people "seek her like a universal demigod for the pains of the body and afflictions of the spirit."⁷⁰ And it is these "gifts" that make her a suspicious character. Frías then gives examples from Ramírez Aparicio to show how she helped the poor. Some people said that she lived in a cave, "with owls and bats," while others speculated that she was a boarder in a local house and was a devout woman because she was familiar with all sorts of religious practices.⁷¹ Then came the day when news of her "healing and miracles" reached the Inquisition's ears. They began to "survey and even persecute her."⁷²

La Mulata became aware of these actions against her, but did not flee. The chase ends when the sheriff somehow captures her and puts her in a cell.⁷³ Previous versions of the story simply mention that La Mulata was one day captured. According to Frías, it was because the Inquisition spared no expense or manpower in tracking her down. Moreover, Frías adds that even though the people feared her and her association with the devil, they were on her side: “Large was the consternation that the apprehension of La Mulata caused among the inhabitants of the city, but no one dared murmur for fear of accompanying her, even though many had faith that, making use of the powerful faculties she had, from one moment to the other, she would flee the jail.”⁷⁴ This version presents the strongest, or clearest, critique of the conflict between the Church and the *pueblo*. Frías cleverly interweaves the perceived powers of La Mulata with the *pueblo*’s faith in miracles. Moreover, he makes the strongest connection between La Mulata’s powers and those of Catholic saints. He adds that out of that legend came a parable still in use. When someone is asked to do the impossible, they reply, “I do not make miracles! What, am I the Mulata de Córdoba?” More than implying that La Mulata did the impossible, this statement implies that she made miracles, specifically. At stake in this tale is the Church’s monopoly over miracles and the *pueblo*’s willingness to place its faith in the Church as equally as in a mulata. This support and belief in a mulata is exactly what Frías encourages the reader to reject.

He ends his tale by making fun of the *pueblo*, “it remains as a memory of those good times in which our ‘pueblo,’ earnest and trusting, blindly believed in goblins, ghosts, and phantoms.”⁷⁵ Frías also adds that this is a “true myth,” leading the reader to ask if he means that this myth about La Mulata really did happen or if the tale is genuinely a myth. But far from using a melancholic tone, Frías celebrates the legend of La Mulata as a symbol of the Inquisition’s real disappearance (as a colonial institution), and of the *pueblo*’s presumed move away from superstitious beliefs. It becomes clear in Frías’s version, more than in others, that the Mulata could have only existed in the colonial era, as there was no room in a modern nation for superstitious beliefs in mulata witches.⁷⁶

It is in the nineteenth century when La Mulata is nationalized through the persistent retelling and rewriting of her story. By locating her in the colonial period, authors looked at the past in order to comment on the present. Writers, specifically, succeeded in nationalizing this character by publishing her story in newspapers and magazines where they were more likely to reach larger audiences. Moreover, these publications facilitated an exchange of sorts between the elite and the lower classes in much the same way that the character is said to have transcended class lines herself. Publication of her story diffused oral tradition at the same time that oral folklore sparked a desire in authors to integrate her as part of what would become national literature.

La Mulata entered Mexican consciousness as a symbol of Mexico's racial trajectory, though not as a *Mexican* in her own right. She highlights black themes as an integral part of popular culture in nineteenth-century Mexico. Her character stands out as *the* mulata, both an affirmation of a history of racial mixture as well as a testament to the idea that there were no more blacks in Mexico. There was room but for one or two outstanding, exceptional blacks.⁷⁷ At the same time, this character reinforced José Vasconcelos's twentieth-century notion that the less desirable aspects of Mexico's racially mixed people would simply fade away. The permutations of this character embody and reflect Mexico's development of a racial national consciousness—a shift away from a racially mixed colonial past towards an ideology of mestizaje, or racial mixture indeed, but one that sought to erase the African presence.

Notes

¹ The author would like to thank the following people for their valuable comments on this article: Corrie Martin, Jennifer Helgren, Marcia Hernandez, Traci Roberts-Camps, and Tomomi Kinukawa.

² José Bernardo Couto, "La Mulata de Córdoba y la historia de un peso," ed. Luis Martínez Morales (México, Veracruz: Callejón del diamante, 1998), 5. All translations in this work are the author's, unless otherwise noted.

³ Raimon, Eve Allegra, *The "Tragic Mulatta" Revisited: Race and Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Antislavery Fiction* (New Brunswick, NJ, USA: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 12.

⁴ Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas, "Memín Pingüín: uno de los cómicos mexicanos mas populares como instrumento para codificar al negro," *Afro-Hispanic Review*, vol. 22, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 54.

⁵ For a more detailed analysis of how this process played out in the twentieth century see Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas, *African Mexicans and the Discourse of Modern Nation* (NY-Oxford: University Press of America, 2004).; Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas, "Modern National Discourse and *La Muerte de Artemio Cruz*: The Illusory 'Death' of African Mexican Lineage," *Afro-Hispanic Review*, vol. 23, no. 1 (Spring 2004).

⁶ Raimon, 10.

⁷ Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas, *African Mexicans and the Discourse of Modern Nation* (NY-Oxford: University Press of America, 2004), 2.

⁸ Bridget Christine Arce, "Troping Mexico's Historical No-Bodies," (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2008), 230.

⁹ Antonio García Cubas, *Diccionario geográfico, histórico, y biográfico de los estados unidos mexicanos* (México: Oficina tipográfica de la Secretaría de Fomento, 1890).; Orozco y Berra, *Diccionario universal*, 936.

¹⁰ Couto, "Mulata de Córdoba," 5-6; "Leyenda: La Mulata de Córdoba," *Magazine: Revista de Córdoba*. No. 75, Año 7 (September 2004): 14.

¹¹ José Bernardo Couto, "Historia de un peso," *Calendario de las Señoritas Mexicanas*, ed. Mariano Galván (México: Mariano Galván, 1841).

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid. Couto, "La Mulata de Córdoba," 20.

¹⁴ Couto, "Historia de un peso."

¹⁵ José Bernardo Couto, *Obras del doctor D. José Bernardo Couto* (México: V. Agüeros, 1898), V.

¹⁶ Couto, *Obras*, VII.

¹⁷ Couto, *Obras*, VIII. In the United States this war is better known as the "Mexican War."

¹⁸ Couto, *Obras*, XXI.

¹⁹ Manuel Orozco y Berra, *Apéndice al Diccionario universal de historia y de geografía*, Tomo II, Vol. IX (México: Imprenta de J.M. Andrade y F. Escalante, 1856), 935.

²⁰ Orozco y Berra, *Diccionario universal*, 936.

²¹ Couto, *Obras*, 371.

²² Manuel Ramírez Aparicio, *Los conventos suprimidos en méjico. Estudios biográficos, históricos y arqueológicos* (México: Impr. de J. M. Aguilar, 1861), 96; Ramírez Aparicio, Manuel. *Obras de Don Manuel Ramírez Aparacio*, vol. 1. México: Impr. de V. Agüeros, 1908.175.

²³ This juxtaposition is particularly poignant since the *Tratados de Córdoba*, which granted Mexico's independence from Spain, were signed in the city for which the treaty was named.

²⁴ Ramírez Aparicio, *Conventos suprimidos*, 93.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 94-95.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 95, 96.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 96-97.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

³² Antonio García Cubas, *Diccionario geográfico, histórico, y biográfico de los estados unidos mexicanos* (México: Oficina tipográfica de la Secretaría de Fomento, 1890).; Orozco y Berra, *Diccionario universal*, 936.

³³ *Ibid.*, 97.

³⁴ Arce, 237.

³⁵ While *Tradiciones y leyendas mexicanas* was not published until 1922, it is clear that Riva Palacio either published the tale of La Mulata in a work unknown to cotemporary scholars, or at the very least, shared it with his contemporaries since González Obregón directly quotes a stanza in his own 1891 publication, *México viejo*.

³⁶ Vicente Riva Palacio and Juan de Dios Peza. *Tradiciones y leyendas mexicanas* (Mexico: Librería General, 1922), 206.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 208.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 208-209.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 213-214.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 215-217.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 220.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 222

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁴⁴ José Ortiz Monasterio, *México etérnamente: Vicente Riva Palacio ante la escritura de la historia* (México: Instituto de Investigaciones Dr. José María Luis Mora, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004), 67.

⁴⁵ Riva Palacio and Peza, 207.

⁴⁶ Luis González Obregón, *Época colonial, méxico viejo: noticias históricas, Tradicionales, Leyendas y costumbres del periodo de 1521 A 1821* (México: Tip. de la Escuela Correccional de Artes y Oficios, 1891), 259-260.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 260.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 260-61.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid., 261.

⁵² Ibid., 262.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 264.

⁵⁷ Ibid.; Leonardo Ferrandón, "La Mulata de Córdoba," *Apuntes históricos de mi pueblo, recordando a Yanga: ayer y hoy* (México: Imprenta Unión, 1963), 128.

⁵⁸ González Obregón, 264.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 265.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 265. Emphasis original. Translation by Martin Camps.

⁶¹ Ibid., 265-66

⁶² Ibid., 266.

⁶³ Carlos G Peña and Luís G. Urbina, "Introduction," in *Las calles de México: leyendas y sucesos, vida y costumbres de otros tiempos* (México: Editorial Porrúa, 2001), X.

⁶⁴ Castro Leal, "Prologue," in *Leyendas de las calles de México*. ed. M. Aguilar (México: Artes gráficas ibermex, 1976), 17.

⁶⁵ González Obregón, 260.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 261.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 260.

⁶⁸ “La Mulata De Córdoba,” *El Imparcial*, October 17, 1897, 1. While this article does not indicate the author, his mention of González Obregón and Ramirez Aparicio as well as the details of the story corroborate with later versions written by Heriberto Frías.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Heriberto Frías, *Leyendas Históricas Mexicanas y otros relatos* (México: Editorial Porrúa, 2002) 316.

⁷⁵ “La Mulata De Córdoba,” *El Imparcial*, 1.

⁷⁶ La Mulata’s legend has also had a presence on the stage. Aurelio Luis Gallardo wrote and staged a lesser-known theatrical score called *La Hechicera de Córdoba* (1869), choosing with this title to highlight her powers of sorcery as an indicator of her race. In the twentieth century various playwrights and composers would interpret the story in the form of plays, an operetta, and a ballet. All three of these twentieth-century interpretations bore the usual title, “La Mulata de Córdoba.”

⁷⁷ Mario Martín-Flores, “Nineteenth-Century Prose Fiction,” *Mexican Literature: A History*, ed. David William Foster (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1994), 114.