

# Talking About Mestizaje: History, Value, and the Racial Present

by

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## Abstract

This paper draws upon historical and ethnographic research to think through the effects of Mestizaje on Mexico's Black populations. The author argues that while a national discourse on Mestizaje was adopted as a strategy for national identity in the post-independence era, it may have promoted the "un-imagining" of Afro-Mexicanos from national racial and cultural landscapes although Blacks quite possibly maintained regional and racial identities due to day to day interaction, proximity, and cultural necessity. However, this identity only becomes politically useful as a changing political climate when it makes difference salient within a neo-liberal and "multicultural" Mexico.

## Introduction

The Costa Chica on the Pacific shores of Guerrero and Oaxaca has been highlighted as a Black region within Mexico. The highlighting of the many pueblos on the coast belonging to a perceived "Black region" has prompted the asking of numerous questions concerning the concept and realities of race within the nation of Mexico, as well as the questioning the logic of mestizaje as a defining social framework. The Black communities along the southern Oaxacan coastline have been incorporated into the nation in a similar manner to that of the indigenous communities within Mexico. In one sense, the communities have been labeled traditional, located in a social and geographical backwater that speaks to the anti-modern relics of Mexico's past. In another sense, the inhabitants of these communities have been interpreted within the discourse of mestizaje, read as absence of tradition, thus arguing against the existence of cultural and ethnic "authenticities".

Hence, my use of authentic does not draw upon the reconceptualization of the modern nation brought about by the earlier work of Boas and Du Bois as outlined by Briggs, where through the lens of multiculturalism hybridized cultures become “inauthentic” (Briggs: 92). While I am not aware of the use of the term authenticity among African descendents or Black activists within Mexico, I use the term authenticities in reference to the distinct social locations occupied by Mexico’s Black citizens, as well as other members of the global African Diaspora that have allowed for a hybrid yet “authentic” cultural development specific to particular locations/nation states. In this sense, African descendants within Mexico can be seen as owners of specific cultural forms and subjectivities that while effected by the rhetoric of mestizaje, can be viewed as distinct from mestizo culture in a manner similar to indigenous communities. In this way Blacks within Mexico are allowed an identity apart from that created by the contemporary rhetoric on mestizaje. And moreover, the negative connotation of the term “negro”, a hold-over from the distinct racial system imposed by the Spanish conquistadors, as well as a global human enslavement market, has made the question of “authenticity” even more perilous. For this reason, the term Moreno, perhaps a reification or reinterpretation of the caste system, has become the preferred term for many Black inhabitants of the Costa Chica (Lewis 2000, 2001, 2006).

In her text *Hall of Mirrors*, Laura Lewis highlights the power dynamic within the caste system utilized by Spanish colonialism. Lewis argues that this system allowed for more social movement and a dynamic that does not exist within a system of strict racial hierarchy (2003) where a type of “one-drop” rule may be employed in order to institutionally and socially exclude specific individuals from particular racial groups’ access to resources. While the caste system plays on race and space in different ways than a strict racial hierarchy, the persistence of race and biology, or phenotype, can still be seen to play an important role within the caste system (Safa 1998). Biological and therefore social qualities were seen to be inherent or endemic to specific caste positions, and thus, these assumed biological and social features point to a process of racialization that cannot be overlooked and of course important in the creation of racial subjectivities and community imaginations (Omi & Winant 1994).

Here, the experience of race is meaningful in a number of aspects along with resistance to institutionalized forms of racism that may lead to alliances built upon the experience of racialization. And while racialized Black identities may be discordant depending upon regional locations and specific national periods, the consequences of race is meaningful to everyday life and expressed socially and politically through unifying local identities. Thus, while the term Moreno may highlight the reality of miscegenation, the term may also still relate to racial and racialized identities, i.e. Blackness, within Black communities in the Costa Chica. Therefore, rather than the concept of an imagined Black community being an import based on foreign histories of racism (especially within the United States) and 20th century foreign racial politics, the existence of a “Black community” within Mexico may be a historic feature beginning when the first people of African descent set foot in New Spain.

With the arrival of the Spanish came a system of racial and caste hierarchies that would affect the development of later Black communities. The free and enslaved, or Mulatto and African, involvement in the colonization process does not only address the role of African descendents in the economic and social development of the colonies and later the Mexican nation, but also to the diversity and complexity inherent within any community. Such social categories as free and enslaved undoubtedly affected the development of distinct racial and social identities between and among Blacks in Mexico. However, uniformed discrimination and the process of racialization, that is the value ascribed to biology and phenotype along with the shared experience of race, may have been responsible for the creation of subjectivities common in many aspects to African descendents, similar to Du Bois' understanding of diasporic cosmopolitanism (Briggs 2005). In this vein, Ben Vinson argues for the creation of a race based Black community or communities fostered by the leadership of Black militia officers that had been allowed certain levels of social mobility (2001). As a result negros and pardos became Afro-Mexicans, or more regionally specific, communities of Afro-Veracruzanos or Afro-Yucatecos (Restall 2000, Vinson 2001).

Ted Vincent's research on the role of Black's in the struggle for independence highlights the existence of these communities. Vincent argues that the communities on the coast played a major role in the war effort for independence, and that the issue of race and slavery were important, if not fundamental, to such historical independence figures as Guerrero and Morelos (1994). While Blacks from coastal communities fought in many battles against the Spanish forces, these battles often placed African descendents against each other. The opposing views of African descendents and their choosing, or succumbing to coercion by the Spanish, to fight on the side of the Spanish colonies does not suggest a lack of a "Black community", but rather it highlights the complexities and diversity within the Black community, and all communities. Hence, Vincent argues that the impetus for many Blacks to fight for the independence of the Mexican nation was to end the Spanish caste system (1994). While the success of the independence movement may have reconfigured the previous colonial relationship, the pre-existing caste system and race based discrimination, while perhaps shifting somewhat, were maintained on many levels. The national project installed within Mexico during the post-independence period brings with it the beginnings of an ideological erasure of race, and thus any official notion of a "Black community" that may have only played out in perception rather than in practice or reality. Thus, the re-imagining of the Mexican within the context of the emerging nation state did not necessarily coincide with the racial realities or legacy of the previously instated caste system, and therefore the question remains, what happened to Mexico's Black community/communities?

Utilizing the body of literature exploring the presence of Blacks within Mexico, this essay explores this exact question; what happened to Mexico's Black communities? Thus, the exploration of this question takes place in three parts, the developing Black presence and construction of Black communities within colonial Mexico, the ideological erasure of these communities and the Black presence within Mexico beginning with independence, and finally the possibilities for the resurgence of Black identities within Mexico, specifically within the Costa Chica and the resistance that come about due to post-colonial imaginations of Mexican-ness and the legacy of mestizaje. And important to this question of (re)emerging racial identities is the role that Diaspora and immigration is playing on the formation of racial subjectivities among Blacks in the Costa Chica as well as the influences of indigenous political mobilizations on African descendents' understandings of their own social locations within the nation. As research on this latter consideration is scarce, it is my hope that this essay will raise broader questions relating to local experiences of race and how these experiences inform our understandings of the African Diaspora.

## **The Colonial Presence and Discordant Identities**

The Black presence within Latin America dates to the early sixteenth century with the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors. Ben Vinson and Mathew Restall document the existence of Black participation in the settlement process and the incorporation of Africans and their descendents within militia groups aimed at domestic defense (2000, 2001). While the presence of these Africans and their descendents is well documented demographically, the question of community building and the development of identities within these groups remain under-explored. Forced to rely on archival documentation, the above mentioned research highlights how the caste system played out in creating racialized groups and placing these groups within an institutional racial and ethnic hierarchy. This archival research has also shed a dim light on the ways in which Blacks within Mexico utilized these hierarchies in forming their own communities. Among the many nomenclature used to distinguish Blacks from their colonial counterparts, Spaniards and indigenous, the most utilized terms are those of pardo, negro, and mulatto. While these terms had clear racial meanings, they were utilized and applied differently between Spaniards and Blacks in both personal and institutional capacities (Vinson 2001). Hence, closer examination of the use of these terms draws attention to the varied historical experiences of race among indigenous, Blacks, and Spaniards within specific historic eras (Omi & Winant 1994).

Herman Bennett argues that in 1640, the year the Portuguese human enslavement project to the Spanish Americas ended, colonial Mexico contained the second largest population of enslaved Africans and the highest population of free Blacks within the Americas (2003: 01). Within a century of Cortes' expedition into New Spain, Portuguese human traders had brought 110, 000 enslaved Africans to the region.

By 1646, the census counted 116, 529 persons of African descent in colonial Mexico, and by 1810 Bennett argues that the free Black population numbered over 600,000, or 10% of the total population (2003: 1). By this time the free population considerably outnumbered that of the enslaved population within Mexico. While Bennett's numbers of free Blacks do not address the existence, by any means, of a consciously unified community, the numbers are important to understanding the potential for the mobilization of unifying racial and ethnic ties among these free Blacks.

While the imposition of racial hierarchies was also utilized by African descendents, the large population created opportunities for communities to develop among individuals' identifying with the same caste markers. Hence, my focus on Black communities goes beyond the mobilization of race for governmental politics in the sense of resource appropriation and recognition to the strategies that satisfy the basic cultural and physical needs of individuals. Rather than seeing the mobilization of race as a strategy to simply counter the institution of slavery, it is important to recognize the everyday meanings of race and ethnicity and how communities mobilized around familiarity in order to maintain and re-create culture. And while meanings of race are constantly negotiated on both institutional and social levels, my intention is to focus on the social outcomes of everyday experiences of race (Omi & Winant 1994).

Furthermore, Bennett argues that Africans and persons of African descent created communities that expanded the boundaries of the households in which they served as enslaved persons and bridged cultural divisions. Yet even as "Angolans" formed communities with individuals from 'Lamba Land', for example, they retained their newly imposed ethnic identities" (2003: 82). Bennett's argument here highlights the use of community in two distinct ways. While African descendents began to create networks among themselves, based on a sense of generic "Blackness" (and all of the value that this term referenced), the use of imposed ethnicities helped to maintain ethnic boundaries that were meaningful on personal levels and perhaps also helped to maintain a sense of past. Continuing, Bennett argues that these ethnic boundaries also influenced the choice of marriage partners among these multilevel communities (2003: 82). Hence, maintained ethnicities may have also allowed for the utilization of experiences and racialized bodies as sites of familiarity, which in turn fostered the fortification of ethnic and racial communities. Within these communities it is doubtless that the caste system played a role in communal hierarchies, but the caste system itself may have been utilized in different capacities from within. Napolitano's (2002) use of the concept of prisms of belonging can be useful here in understanding how people express different situated selves under different circumstances. According to Napolitano, the purpose of prisms of belonging "is to indicate the heterogeneous perceptions, feelings, desires, contradictions, and images that shape the experiences of space and time" (Napolitano: 9). While pointing to the variance of experiences within communities, Napolitano's concept can also be applied to understanding the varied experiences of society and social phenomenon between groups, leading to what have been called vernacular modernities (Napolitano 2002) or vernacular cosmopolitanism (Briggs 2005).

Bennett argues that identity for African descendents was not a preordained essence in the New World, but rather it was carefully constructed (2003). This careful construction of identity drew upon experiences within the context of slavery and other institutional exclusions and inclusions, but must have been formed by experiences of family and community, or internal understandings of selfhood as well. In this sense, identities become multiple, as well as political, and were mobilized for different means within different contexts. Thus, my intention here is not to explore historical identity formation among African descendents, but rather to highlight how race and the process of racialization were felt differently and employed differently within different capacities; one being institutional and another being communal (Omi & Winant). And therefore I think this recognition is important in uncovering a continued sense of community throughout the colonial period until the present to suggest that the continued existence of Black communities within Mexico is less of a phenomenon, and more of a deliberate cultural process.

Ben Vinson acknowledges the importance of confraternities and *cabildos* in preserving and developing facets of Black culture within Mexico, while simultaneously providing material assistance to free Blacks in times of need (Vinson 2000: 02, Von Germeten 2006). Confraternities were utilized by African descendents within Mexico as community organizations as well as how to highlight African descendents' own incorporation into larger Spanish society. Hence, Von Germeten provides an exhaustive study of the different Black confraternities within Mexico, and how these organizations were used not only to provide for community needs, but also to foster social mobility. Von Germeten explains that participation within confraternities may not have been an individual's only source of personal or communal identity, but that race did influence an individual's experience within a confraternity (2006). Confraternities were created based on identities formed both before and after enslavement. "Some confraternities characterized their members as from a specific African place of origin and others extended membership only to mulattos or Blacks, making a distinction between individuals identified by these racial labels" (Von Germeten: 192). Von Germeten goes on to argue that confraternity founders worked hard at preventing anyone with a different racial designation as the confraternity from becoming organizational leaders (2006: 192). Later confraternities of the eighteenth century were subject to the same effects of the caste system as seen within the broader society. The eighteenth century brings with it a shift in the labels of confraternities, as they integrated members of the different castes. And no longer were the confraternities of this period labeled negro or "Black", but they rather reflected the Spanish authorities' preference for the term mulatto.

The militia also played an important part in reinforcing Black identities. Ben Vinson asks two important questions, 1) "given that colonial Mexico was a society where 'racial drift' and even 'passing' were possible, did the mulatto or pardo ever feel a racial identity as such, and 2) did free-coloreds bond or feel a race based affinity, especially considering that racial discourse during the colonial period was largely defined by and worked for the benefit of others" (2001)? Vinson's questions are important in exploring how race was experienced from the bottom, or inside, rather than from the top, or within an institutional context.

While the militia may have provided more opportunities for Blacks than civilian life, race became even more salient within the lives of militiamen. Vinson argues that, “by enrolling in the free-colored corps, soldiers participated in an institution that was often segregated and defined by race. As a result, upon joining, race assumed added meaning in their lives, perhaps more so than for the average Mexican colonist” (2001: 4). Joining the militia allowed for the creation of new networks with other persons of color (Vinson: 4). While the logic of whitening holds that social mobility is gained through the eroding of racial connections, for militia members mobility comes with an even more pronounced racial identity. For Blacks, participation in the militia brought with it more opportunity than were available to other individuals within civilian life. These opportunities were sometimes the basis for internal rifts among Blacks. This reinforces the notion that racial identities were strongly predicated upon the heavy desire for privilege, however when threats to the soldiers’ rights emanated from outside of their own organization, militiamen utilized a unified front (Vinson 2001). While the caste system infiltrates even the militia units, the meanings of these different nomenclatures were negotiated among the militiamen themselves and may have been employed within different contexts. Vinson argues that the use of the same terms, *pardo* and *moreno*, varied between the crown and soldiers, and that this variance in use reflects separate racial outlooks (2001).

This difference in racial outlook is important to the continued existence of racialized Black communities within Mexico, especially within the face of the caste system and the possibilities of social mobility brought about by “whitening”. The utilization of “whitening” as a strategy to social mobility may have been only part of the reality of race for Mexico’s African descendents. Bennett argues that, “for Africans and their descendents, the imposed patterns of social stratification and their own community boundaries were very different phenomena” (2003: 125). This highlights how Blacks in Mexico were not only subjected to the caste system, but they were also aware of the processes involved in the project of racialization and therefore utilized the same process to create communities based on racial subjectivities. These communities, while affected by the racial hierarchies at play within the caste system, may have also incorporated individuals from the various castes, while simultaneously maintaining racial or ethnic identities. As Carroll notes, the family played a large part in the socialization process, and undoubtedly the changing racial dynamics within this same institution in Mexico would be responsible for allowing for the recognition of racial and communal ties (Carroll 1991). That is to argue that while racial mixing may have allowed for the adoption of strategies for social mobility within an institutional context, within a communal context, race may have been the tie that bound Black communities together rather than facilitating racial cleavages. Napolitano’s prisms of belonging again become helpful in highlighting the many lenses available to racialized subjects of New Spain.

Bennett argues that in the seventeenth century “Mexico’s diverse and growing creole population displayed a marked affinity for other Blacks and mulattos in the selection of matrimonial sponsors; although this pattern reflected the currency of hypergamia - the phenomenon wherein one parent’s heritage carried greater weight in defining offspring - it also magnifies the metamorphosis of race into culture” (2003: 110). Hence, the creation and maintenance of Black social networks reflects the vitality of multiple Black communities, as well as the existence of multiple Black identities or racialized consciousnesses and Mexican independence brings with it the question of nationality, which while perhaps not threatening the existence of these communities and identities, threatens the institutional recognition of Blacks within Mexico, and begins a process of erasure that is facilitated by the promotion of the benefits of the process of “whitening” after the Mexican revolution, and later in the official adoption of the discourse of mestizaje.

### **The Move to Independence and the Effect of Mestizaje**

Ted Vincent argues that the Mexican war for independence was not only a struggle for national independence, but also as a social revolution (1994). According to Vincent, “those of African heritage in Mexico had special incentives to fight, were encouraged to join the struggle, and provided many participants and leaders” (1994). Thus, what is of interest here for my purposes is to highlight the existence of vibrant Black communities at the beginning of the war for independence, and even the mobilization of these communities around issues of race and the discrimination imposed by the caste system. In this sense, Blacks’ involvement in the independence effort can be understood as a racial project as defined by Omi and Winant (1994). And while Vincent may have overlook the importance of communal ties after the war, he argues that Blacks’ involvement in the war for independence was aimed mostly at the possibility to assimilate and on the importance of the lived consequences involving race during the first decade of the nineteenth century. Hence, this imposition of the caste system not only created racial boundaries, but it also allowed for resistance predicated on issues of race. According to Vincent, Hidalgo, during the first months of the conflict, declares the abolition of slavery and caste laws. After Hidalgo’s death in 1811, Morelos takes up the cause and calls for the banning of slavery and caste distinctions, as well as elaborating on indigenous rights (Vincent: 259). Vincent suggests that for the “darker” people of Mexico, the revolution spoke of equal opportunity and social integration (1994: 259).

The question of integration becomes important throughout Latin America and the Caribbean during the nineteenth century. In 1821, Mexico, having achieved official independence, is faced with the same question confronting other Latin American nations. The question of the national citizen seems to be answered by the erasure of race, promoted as equality, and the adoption of a class based system. According to Vincent, a series of laws are drafted shortly after independence, which reflected the importance of racial equality during this period.

Law #303 prohibits public officials from speaking disparagingly of any citizen's ethnic background, while law #313 prohibited the use of race in any government document and in any church records such as marriage, baptism, and death (1994: 272). While these laws may have been interpreted as successes for indigenous and Blacks within Mexico, as Vincent argues that their incorporation within the larger social system was one of the main goals of African descendent participation in the conflict, hence these concessions may have played out only officially, and that the dismantling of the caste system did not necessarily call for an end to discrimination or racism towards Mexico's Black communities. The myriad of critiques of the colorblind approach to contemporary multicultural projects, as helping to continue to foster inequality, can be seen to illustrate this point. Vincent sites Aguirre Beltran's "La Poblacion Negra", where Aguirre Beltran argues that, "the one transcendent event of the revolution for independence" was "the change from a system of caste to class" (in Vincent: 260). While the adoption of a class system may allow for the projection of a singular Mexican system, the reality of this class system may have only served to reinstate the caste system, and perpetuate the former exclusion of citizens based on race.

The numerous considerations of Brazil's social system reflect the entanglement of the social phenomena of race and class. While Brazil was once projected as the successful model of racial mixing within Latin America based on the writings of such authors as Freyre (Martinez-Echazabal 1998), later studies show that the experience of the lower classes is also an experience of race within the larger social system. Access to social mobility within Brazil, for example, has historically come through the process of whitening, yet race still plays a part in creating a cap for social mobility in general. The same can be said for social mobility within Mexico, which comes through a process of whitening through mestizaje. While studies on social mobility and the current meaning of race within Mexico are becoming more numerous, I think that one of the best examples of this is highlighted by my own experience.

While discussing my interest in African descendents in Mexico with several Mexicanos and Chicanos (both in Mexico and the US), a repeated anecdote often arises. My interlocutors often told me, "one of my relatives (sister, aunt) is negro or moreno". This is often followed by the qualification "mas negro que tu" (even Blacker than you). It is interesting that this strategy serves to create boundaries between "us and them", even within the same family, as a relative's racial nomenclature from the previous generation may have no effect on current affiliation. This example highlights the processes of whitening involved within the discourse of mestizaje, as some view Blackness as an escapable quality, while those unsuccessful or devoid of access to this strategy may view Blackness in more than just simply phenotypic terms.

While the mixing process during the nineteenth century in Mexico is not promoted under the rhetoric of mestizaje, there are similarities within the process. Martinez-Echazabal argues that mestizaje “is a foundational theme in the Americas, particularly in those areas colonized by the Spanish and the Portuguese” (1998: 21). During the nineteenth century, according to Martinez-Echazabal, mestizaje is a recurrent trope, linked to the search for “Lo Americano”. This discovery of the unique American is instrumental to the many national projects under construction in Latin America in the nineteenth century. Martinez-Echazabal goes on to argue that during the period of what she refers to as the “period of national consolidation and modernization” (1920s-1960s) “mestizaje underscored the affirmation of cultural identity as constituted by ‘national character’” (1998: 21), specifically for my interests here, lo mexicano.

With the help of Vasconcelos and others, the post-revolutionary twentieth century gives birth to the image of the mestizo and the mulatto (Martinez-Echazabal, 1998). Vasconcelos, while projecting a project of equality through mixing, can ultimately be seen to endorse a broader project of whitening. Vasconcelos argues that through the voluntary extermination of the negative qualities of the inferior races (through mixing) the cosmic race can take its place within Latin America (Vasconcelos 1979). While Vasconcelos argues that all of the races have something to offer to the mixing process, a system of values or hierarchies is imposed upon the races or “roots”, with the ultimate positive value being placed on whiteness. Within the rhetoric of mestizaje, whiteness is ultimately linked to modernity (Safa 1998), while the perpetuation of the “inferior races” is seen as a threat to the achievement of modernity and the ability for Mexico to take its place on the global stage.

Helen Safa argues that, “although mestizaje affirmed race mixture, it maintained white supremacy through a hegemonic discourse of blaqueamiento (whitening)” (1998: 05). This process of blaqueamiento is in opposition to the strategy of strict exclusion adopted during the same period in the United States. Safa suggests that the use of domination in the United States and the use of hegemony, or coercion, within Latin America both bring about forms of white supremacy (1998). Not only do these two racial strategies bring about similar forms of white supremacy (while perhaps bringing about dis-similar racial economies), but they also allow for the maintenance of Black communities and identities, or even broader racial consciousnesses. For example, within the U.S., hypodescent, culminating in the one-drop rule, has led to the historical visibility of Blackness among the United States Black population. This visibility has also fostered the development of a visible “Black culture” within the U.S. as well. The one-drop rule is a way for the larger society or nation to visibly identify Blackness within an institutional sense. In this sense hypodescent should be viewed more as a tool for recognition, both from above and below, rather than proof of the existence of a “Black culture” or community. Relying on hypodescent as connotative of the existence of Blackness overlooks how Blackness is lived among individuals and how race may be utilized to create communities from the ground up. What I suggest is that the one-drop rule does not get at the conflicts within communities over issues of skin color and cultural authenticity that exist within the “Black community” in the United States, on the other hand, disputes over phenotype do not negate the existence of cultural and political communities.

Similarly, mestizaje may also foster the creation of communities and consciousness based on race and ethnicity, even while institutionally employing hegemonic processes of “national” similarity. Going back to Bennett’s consideration of the disparities between racial boundaries utilized by the state and local communities, while mestizaje may have been utilized on an institutional level for the appropriation of privileges and resources, it may have also been less important for the development of racial identities. Thus, the racialization processes employed by the rhetoric of mestizaje may have allowed for the unification of individuals based on shared racial subjectivities, and that inter-group (read caste) conflicts, as seen both in Latin America and in the U.S., are inherent to any racialized group. Here the creation of culture as argued by Bennett (2003) about the hypodescent and the mestizaje is important because via a focus on culture in Black communities highlight how Black communities may have maintained their existence as a contestation to the forces of the national project and the mestizaje rhetoric.

While the national and post-revolutionary periods in Mexico may have forced a renegotiation of race among Blacks in Mexico, the legacy of colonization remains, and the effects of the racialization process during the colonial period cannot simply be imagined away through later discourses of nation and mestizaje. In this context, Alonso demonstrates the creation of a “warrior spirit” within the mestizo communities of the northern Mexico border during the colonial period consisting of a sanctioned identity that became oppositional to post-revolutionary projects, yet it remained ingrained in community consciousness (Alonso 1995). As Omi and Winant argue that racial formation is shaped by existing race relations in any given historical period (Omi & Winant 1994), racial formation may have followed a similar development as the “warrior spirit” of Alonso’s northern border communities formed, and rather than erase racial consciousness among African descendents during the national and post-revolutionary periods in Mexico it may have served to create a type of Du Boisian “double-consciousness” within Mexico’s Black communities.

## **Conclusion**

Most recently mestizaje has been drawn upon to promote heterogeneity, rather than homogeneity. Martinez-Echazabal argues “since the 1980s, the concept of mestizaje has come to play an important role in the recognition of the plurality of cultural identities (1998:21). According to Lomnitz, the 1980s brings with it the beginning of the neo-liberal turn in Mexico. The neo-liberal turn in Mexico re-arranges the relationship to resources of the many groups that were previously grouped together within the context of class and opened up space for future identity politics as a strategy for the acquisition of resources and opposition to neo-liberal reforms focusing on privatization (Berger 2001). This neo-liberal moment has had a number of consequences on the utilization of cultural politics of difference by indigenous groups and more recently by African descendents within Mexico, and how these groups have engaged the pre-existing rhetoric of mestizaje and exclusion.

Within this essay, I have attempted to highlight the possibility of a continued Black cultural presence within Mexico. This cultural tradition was clearly developed, as Bennett, Vinson, Restall, and Vincent demonstrate, during the colonial period. The era of independence and nationalism brought a need to define the national citizenry, and it is in this period arose the ideological erasure of a Black presence and identity within Mexico. While this erasure may have been successful within an institutional setting, on a communal level, issues of race and ethnicity have been important to the historic maintenance of African descendent communities during the national era.

As indigenous struggles show, the neo-liberal period has provided the impetus for struggles of citizenship and inclusion based on indigenous rights. African descendents in Latin America have followed the lead of indigenous groups in attempting to take political action for the securing of collective rights, yet they are confronted with specific obstacles that do not exist for other groups in Latin America. For example, African descendents in Latin America are forced to prove the existence of difference based on ethnicity (read culture) rather than racial discrimination in order to participate within the field of multicultural politics framed by neo-liberal reforms. Thus, the strategy for inclusion defined by what Hale (2002) has labeled neo-liberal multiculturalism focuses on identity as a political marker which may ultimately work against African descendents that lack the ability to lay claim to autochthonous origins pre-dating the development of Latin American nations, as they continue to be viewed through the lens of *mezizaje*.

And as neo-liberal multiculturalism demands that groups politicize their identities, the successes to these struggles often depend on the broader national acceptance of historic/traditional cultural existence. Hence in Mexico, the African descendents are confronted with such problems and thus strategies to secure citizenship and collective rights based on politicized Black identities will not succeed without highlighting the real continued existence and maintenance of Black culture and identities throughout Mexican history, despite the continued attempts for an ideological erasure of Mexican Blackness.

To borrow from Napolitano's concept of "prisms of belonging", "prisms have a refractive and, to some extent, elusive nature: what we can see through them depends on the angle we are looking through" (2002: 10). Looking through the prism also entails a sense of looking back, which in a political sense allows us to (re)imagine how we have arrived at our present locations. The highlighting of culture is important to this process, and for Mexico's African descendents Bonfil-Batalla's concept of "Mexico Profundo" may take on another meaning, that is that Mexico, viewed through one of Napolitano's prisms, may be defined by an experience of Blackness. Ultimately, I think this is essential to locating Black culture and the consequence of processes of racialization within Mexico, as well as understanding the current Black movement within the Costa Chica and the nation's overall attempt at incorporating this movement into its current conception of the multi-cultural milieu that is the Mexican nation state.

Ultimately, the lack of access to distinct cultural group identities has been crucial for the continued denial of collective rights for African descendents in Latin America, and multi-cultural reforms continue to “determine the ‘political opportunity structure’ faced by Black and indigenous movements” in Latin America (Hooker, 2005). This multicultural playing field created by neo-liberal reforms is also affecting the way in which Mexico’s African descendents are (re)imagining their own positions and value within the broader nation.

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