Creating the Ideal Mexican: 20th and 21st Century Racial and National Identity Discourses in Oaxaca

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Creating the Ideal Mexican: 20th and 21st Century Racial and National Identity Discourses in Oaxaca

A Dissertation Presented

By

SAVANNAH N. CARROLL

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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W.E.B. Du Bois Department of Afro-American Studies
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ABSTRACT

CREATING THE IDEAL MEXICAN: 20TH AND 21ST CENTURY RACIAL AND NATIONAL IDENTITY DISCOURSES IN OAXACA

SEPTEMBER 2015

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This investigation intends to uncover past and contemporary socioeconomic significance of being a racial other in Oaxaca, Mexico and its relevance in shaping Mexican national identity. The project has two purposes: first, to analyze activities and observations of cultural missionaries in Oaxaca during the 1920s and 1930s, and second to relate these findings to historical and present implications of blackness in an Afro-Mexican community. Cultural missionaries were appointed by the Secretary of Public Education (SEP) to create schools throughout Mexico, focusing on the modernization of marginalized communities through formal and social education. This initiative was intended to resolve socioeconomic disparities and incorporate sectors of the population into the national framework that had been excluded prior to the Mexican Revolution in 1910. While these efforts
were predominantly implemented in indigenous communities located in the northern part of Oaxaca, observations from cultural missionaries related to social and educational conditions reveal ongoing disparities between what it means to be indigenous versus mestizo. The exclusion of moreno, or Afro-descended people from this state sponsored initiative indicates that blackness along with indiginity is otherized, with the primary difference being that Afro-descended Mexicans lack visibility.

To gain a better perspective of the historical and present significance of blackness, my project moves from the general to the specific to include José Maria Morelos, Oaxaca, an Afro-descended community that is isolated, has no tourist attractions or services, dirt roads, and little access to socioeconomic resources. Morelos was established by blacks who escaped slavery and lived independently in their own community. People in the town strongly identify with this history and its relation to their present condition. After speaking with local activists, it became apparent that rights that were supposed to be gained from the Mexican Revolution, such as land rights and public education, did not happen in Morelos, which adversely affects people’s prospects for socioeconomic advancement.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION- DEFINING MEXICANIDAD: HOW RACIAL “OTHERS” WERE CREATED IN POST-REVOLUTIONARY MEXICO

What is going to emerge out there is the definitive race, the synthetical race, the integral race, made up of the genius and the blood of all peoples and, for that reason, more capable of true brotherhood and of a truly universal vision.

- José Vasconcelos, La Raza Cósmica, [1925] 1997

Project’s Intervention

The post-revolutionary era was selected as the starting point for the investigation’s analysis due to the overwhelming majority of historical research on Mexico’s black population being concentrated on the colonial and Independence eras (1521-1821).¹ Although sociological and anthropological studies engage blackness during the post-revolutionary period (1921-present), an historical analysis of the Afro-descended population in this particular moment is necessary to determine how Afro-descended people were understood by the larger society, how they understand themselves, and the relationship between identity

politics and citizenship. An historical analysis is also influential in understanding blackness in a contemporary context. This investigation emphasizes the necessity of interdisciplinary methods and analysis in reinserting black people into the twentieth century discourse of post-revolutionary Mexico. Additionally, the research draws a connection between how race is confronted through twentieth century nation-building projects and its resonance for the present-day Afro-descended population.

Relevance of Project to Discipline

African American Studies as a discipline seeks to understand the political, social, cultural, and economic experience of Afro-descended peoples throughout the world. A central objective in interpreting this experience is emphasizing Afro-descended peoples’ agency as an indication of how they have shaped their respective societies. My project contributes to this objective by examining Afro-Mexicans’ past and present relationship with the State, specifically their struggle for socioeconomic and political inclusion. Scholarly investigations concerning the Afro-Mexican population are becoming more prevalent, expanding the global dimensions of African-American Studies and establishing Afro-Mexican Studies as a viable area of research. Cutting-edge scholarship in Afro-Mexican Studies
is particularly concerned with uncovering the hidden history of black people in Mexico and exploring a history that has been strategically excluded from national memory. Thus, the primary task is to reinsert Afro-Mexicans into the national framework by conducting investigations that analyze how they existed during the colonial and independence era, pre-revolutionary era, and post-revolutionary period and how this analysis informs the current socioeconomic status of Afro-Mexicans. My project is aligned with this purpose in that it engages the impact race that has had in influencing constructions of national identity and citizenship as well as determining how the government allocates socioeconomic resources. Moreover, my project specifically examines how this process has continued and currently affects Afro-Mexicans in Morelos, Oaxaca.

_Somos La Raza Cosmica: Promoting the Myth of Racial Equality in Mexico_

The trajectory of Mexican intellectual discourse represents a progression toward modernity, cultural and national uniformity, and patriotism. The end result of these efforts, specifically in regard to cultural and national amalgamation, is an adoption of _mestizaje_ ideology that embraces _mestizo_ identity to the exclusion of blackness. The dissertation’s historical conversation of the development of racial construction begins in
1916 with Manuel Gamio’s *Forjando Patria*. As a leading pioneer in establishing anthropological investigation in Mexico, Gamio emphasized the significance of qualitative and quantitative methods in documenting data concerning the indigenous population. According to Gamio, documenting such data was necessary to assist in the government’s efforts toward national and cultural unification. From his perspective, the revolutionary government “should begin to lay the foundations upon which to gradually build an equilibrated and strong national society”. Arguments presented in *Forjando Patria* are relevant to this investigation in their representation of race, national identity, and culture. These arguments symbolize the beginning of racial construction in the twentieth century and establish a recurring theme of racial and cultural amalgamation through a negation of blackness. Furthermore, *Forjando Patria* marks the establishment of discourse pertaining to racial and national identity centering on the mestizo category and presents solutions to the “Indian problem”. While the philosophical approach to addressing national, cultural, and racial unification by subsequent intellectuals differed, the common thread is the exclusion of Afro-descended Mexicans’ presence from this discussion.

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Mestizaje – the defining characteristic of twentieth century racial, national, and cultural identity discourse in Mexico – became the primary method to achieve unification. José Vasconcelos’s *La Raza Cósmica*, published in 1926, elaborates on how *mestizaje* ideology facilitates the process of national amalgamation. Though the focus remained on resolving the “Indian problem”, it further developed into a theory that challenged foreign cultural and economic domination, particularly from the United States. According to Vasconcelos, the destiny of Latin America was for all races to merge into a super or cosmic race that would elevate the region to its rightful position of economic, cultural, and racial superiority. He argues:

> The days of the pure whites, the victors of today, are as numbered as were the days of their predecessors. Having fulfilled their destiny of mechanizing the world, they themselves have set, without knowing it the basis for a new period: The period of the fusion and mixing of all peoples.\(^3\)

Despite Vasconcelos’s condemnation of white supremacy, his analysis of racial and national identity is inherently Eurocentric and discriminatory toward racial others. In regard to the indigenous population, Vasconcelos’s rhetoric is paternalistic and encourages cultural assimilation to attain

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modernity. As far as Afro-descended people, Vasconcelos does not consider them in his vision of a more progressive nation, enabling their socioeconomic subjugation. While the cosmic race theory argues that all pure races will cease to exist, further interrogation of racial and national identity construction reveals that there are limits to Vasconcelos’s vision of a racial utopia. Ultimately, the cosmic race theory privileges whiteness, marginalizes indigenerity, and absolutely excludes blackness, leaving Afro-descended Mexicans at the fringes of society.

I’m Black, pero soy tejana tambien: Motivations for Learning about Blacks in Mexico

Pursuing a PhD in Afro-American Studies has provided an opportunity to reflect on my personal background and how I understand my racial identity. As a native of San Antonio, Texas, where the majority of people are not black, but also not white, an appreciation of Mexican or Mexican-American culture was never unfamiliar to me. While I gained a strong sense of myself as an African-American from my family, my upbringing in a predominantly Hispanic environment also gave me an orientation to Mexican American culture that in many ways encourages separation between black and brown identity. Thus the concept of Afro-Mexican identity was not given consideration because it
was presumed that black and Mexican are mutually exclusive categories. From my perspective, African Americans and Mexican Americans in my city were similar in terms of socioeconomic level, but defined themselves as polar opposites in terms of culture, and assumed to have a contentious relationship. I was aware that blackness existed in countries such as Puerto Rico, Brazil, Dominican Republic, and Cuba; however, the notion of an Afro-descended population in Mexico never crossed my mind.

In college, I gained this awareness. My first exposure to the legacy of blacks in Mexico was during a leadership and cultural development conference at Arizona State University. A presentation that emphasized the importance of black history throughout the African Diaspora mentioned the existence of black people in Mexico. I was surprised to hear this information for multiple reasons. First, I was stunned that I spent most of my life in a city that is known for its resilient Mexican cultural influence and was unaware that people of African descent live in Mexico. Secondly, it confirmed what I had always felt but did not know how to articulate: the connection between being black and Hispanic is Afro-Latino. I thought learning more about this population could be a useful method for creating a dialogue for cultural understanding, acceptance, and solidarity between the African American and Mexican American community. As a result,
my positionality as an African American woman born and raised in San Antonio, Texas gives me a unique perspective and motivation to study the black presence in Mexico.

I visited Mexico beyond border cities in 2010 when I spent ten weeks in Guadalajara doing an intensive language immersion program. I was commonly mistaken for Jamaican, Haitian, Cuban, or African – but never African American. When I told people I identify as African American and I am from Texas, they would say “Entonces eres Tejana.” I did not immediately accept this ascription because my understanding of the word Tejano was that it signifies a Texan of Mexican descent and therefore did not apply to me. However, this ascription became so frequent that I eventually began to accept it, realizing that when people asked “De donde eres?” racial, national, and regional identity were implicit in the question. As a result, I learned to embrace my Tejana identity and view it as an equally important part of my racial identification as an African American woman from Texas.

As I interacted with local students studying English, I explained that I wanted to learn Spanish so that I can conduct research about blacks in Mexico. Similar to experiences I had read from other academics, when I expressed my desire to study the black population, people told me that slavery existed during
the colonial period and was abolished shortly after independence. Consequently, any contemporary presence of blacks was foreign as they did not have any native Mexican heritage. When I adamantly insisted that blacks do exist in Mexico and are descendants of its colonial slave and free black population, the conversation moved to another topic. It became clear that people were only receptive to the idea of a contemporary presence of blacks as foreigners, such as myself, but not as Mexican citizens. Strangers were eager to speak to me, ask me where I’m from, questions about my hairstyle, tell me they liked my skin complexion, take pictures with me – but were resistant to my insistence that there are black people in Mexico who are not foreigners and have been there for generations. The lack of acknowledgement of a living, thriving black presence and reluctance to engage this reality when informed of its existence indicates the success of national projects influenced by mestizaje ideology in erasing Afro-descended people from the nation’s historical and contemporary image.

**Methodology**

The frameworks for the dissertation’s research methods are qualitative and ethnographic in the form of archival documents, interviews, and participant observation. Archival documents provide insight into the relationship between racial formation
and national and state processes after the revolution. While documents are useful in establishing the project’s historical foundation, the information gained is limited to past circumstances, making it difficult draw connections with the present. The advantage of field work, particularly interviews, supplements archival documents and furthers the researcher’s ability to understand and analyze data through direct interaction with the subject population. While some consider field work less advantageous and reliable than historical documentation due to its unpredictability, possible lapses in people’s memories and exaggerations, and subjective nature, in my view interviews personalize the data by giving them names, faces, and individual experiences. Furthermore, conducting interviews is imperative when engaging a historically marginalized population considering that there may be little to no formal documentation related to their experience that is not written from a hierarchical perspective. Perceived challenges to field work can be overcome using formal documentation to historically situate interviews with subjects. Documentation also assists in identifying important questions that should be examined during interviews. Participant-observation supplements documentation and interviews by giving the researcher space to consider how their presence influences the data, and the impacts the data has on them. Information collected through this method
along with interviews creates a narrative of the subject population’s contemporary existence and their interactions with a researcher from outside their community. These methods of inquiry synthesize to make my project unique in that it engages the historical through the present and vice versa.

I traveled to the Historical Archive of the Secretary of Public Education, located in Mexico City in June 2012 and spent one month copying documents from the misiones culturales files in Oaxaca, information easily accessible through support from the director of the archive and an archivist. Information included in these files describe the activities of the cultural missionaries, such as classes that were taught, books that were used, effectiveness of the curriculum, observations of cultural and social routines, and methods of agricultural production. Demographic data about people who participated in the missionary program as teachers and pupils is also included in the documents. These records provide the foundation for the project’s historical analysis and enable a broader discussion of racial and national identity discourse in the twentieth century at the federal level, specifically in regard to creating infrastructure and policy. This analysis of the cultural missionaries’ documents will be limited to the 1920’s and 1930’s.
I also traveled to Morelos, Oaxaca for the first time in July 2012 and lived with an Afro-Mexican family for one week. Contact with a local grassroots activist in the Afro-Mexican social movement was established through the help of a faculty member at my institution. Oaxaca was selected as the region of focus not only because I had solidified a local contact, but also because other sociological and anthropological investigations about Afro-descendants in Mexico discuss blackness in Guerrero and Veracruz.\textsuperscript{4} I chose to research blackness in Oaxaca due to the growing social movement in La Costa Chica and for its perspective of mobilization around black ethnic identity that contributes to the larger discussion of Afro-descendants in Mexico. My discussion focuses on the coast of Oaxaca, giving particular attention to the town of Morelos. As such, Morelos will serve as a case study of blackness in an Afro-Mexican community and political mobilization around this identity.

I traveled to Morelos from Oaxaca de Juarez on a bus, a ten hour trip through mountains to a town called Pinotepa Nacionál. A forty-five minute taxi ride took me to Morelos. I stayed for one week with my contact’s mother and father, who live in a complex with other relatives. While in Morelos, I did not conduct interviews; instead, I visited with people in informal conversations. I observed cultural dynamics in regard to family, work, and the community. Although I did not always initiate conversations about ethnic identity, many people volunteered information about the history of the town and their strong identification with being moreno or negro. I took notes from the conversations and photographed people in their everyday routines. I also noted conditions in the town. Though I had some knowledge of the living conditions in black towns throughout La Costa Chica, I was unprepared for what I observed. Reading about abject poverty and lack of access to social and economic resources was different from experiencing it first-hand. The longer I stayed and the more conversations I had with people, the more difficult it became to process my observations. After one week, I was ready to return to Oaxaca de Juarez, glad that I no longer had to witness human beings living under those circumstances, but at the same time, feeling unsettled that poverty and inequality were a part of people’s everyday experience in Morelos.
In addition to speaking to people in Morelos, I traveled with the activist to Pinotepa Nacionál for a meeting between presidents of organizations involved in the social movement throughout the coast of Oaxaca. This meeting made me aware of the extent to which mobilization for the national recognition of Afro-descended communities is a primary issue in the region. Upon returning to Oaxaca de Juarez, my aspirations to learn more about Afro-descended people’s struggle for equality in Mexico were reaffirmed, kindling new inspiration in my dissertation research.

I returned to Morelos in June 2013 to complete my field work. I stayed with the same family again for one month. During this time I conducted formal interviews with people in the town. Political activism was not a requirement for participation; however, these were the people with whom I established contact first. Others were contacted based on who my initial contacts said I should speak with based on their knowledge of the town’s history, involvement in the community, or access to demographic information about the town’s inhabitants. All subjects were at least eighteen years of age and each interview was audio recorded. A total of thirteen people were interviewed, with each interview lasting at least twenty minutes. Participants included ten men and three women,
with occupations such as teachers, farmers, community activists, and homemakers. Some interviewees were also political candidates and town elders. Information from informal interactions with people will also be included in the analysis. In addition to conducting interviews, I video recorded conditions of homes and public facilities, such as schools, bathrooms, and roads. This was necessary to demonstrate the extent to which poverty and lack of government interest has affected people in Morelos.

**Conceptual Frameworks**

**Race/Racism**

The dissertation’s methodological approach highlights race, place, the self, and the nation as integral concepts for analysis. The engagement of these concepts in the analysis enables a greater view of what it means to be black in Morelos. It is not comprehensive, but it provides a space to promote further inquiry into the socioeconomic realities of blackness in that town. To examine the complexities of race and racism, the project employs Étienne Balibar’s definition of race, which argues:

The specific articulation of race is nationalism [which is] paradoxically present in racism itself. The whole question is opened up of how the memory of past exclusions is transferred into the exclusions of the present, or how the internationalization of population movements and the
change in the political role of nation-states can lead into a neo-racism, or even a 'post-racism'.

Based on this definition, an examination of race enhances our understanding of political processes over time that creates conditions for socioeconomic disparities among particular racial groups. As race and racism are engaged in the analysis, the ways in which race is experienced and how the racialization process is understood both by the dominant society and marginalized peoples will be primary areas of discussion. To further establish the relationship between past and contemporary manifestations of racism, the project will include a discussion of what qualifies as historic racism. Timothy J. Stanley argues that all historic racisms meet three criteria: they involve racializations, organize exclusions along racialized lines, and the resulting racialized exclusions have significant negative consequences for the racialized and excluded. Questions related to the discussion of race will be considered in the analysis of

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interviews with Afro-descendants in Morelos as well as historical documents.

Racial formation in Latin America is complex and can be influenced by other factors, such as class, gender, and sexuality. How race is defined and articulated has also varied during particular historical moments, such as the colonial, independence, revolutionary, and post-revolutionary eras. What distinguishes racial formation in Mexico from other Latin American countries is its approach in defining race through national culture. As argued by Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, Mexico’s emphasis on nationalist ideologies and “preoccupation with national culture had been couched in an idiom of ‘race’”. Ideas related to national culture became associated with the mestizo, representing both a racial and class category. The investigation will consider these changes and continuities through an analysis of the relationship between history, nation building, and social constructions of race. For the purpose of this project, race “refers to all the practices and ideas that surround racial classifications and distinctions”. How these

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ideas and practices coalesce to shape Afro-descended Mexicans’ lived experience is a central focus of the study.

Local constructions of race are also an important component of the project. In Morelos, race is constructed through an articulation of place, history, and familial and individual experiences. It is understood that along with many other towns in La Costa Chica, the majority of residents are Afro-descended. The concept of place is significant in identity self-fashioning due to the rich oral tradition that proclaims Morelos as a town that was established by escaped slaves in the sixteenth century and maintained their freedom. While this legacy was not always mentioned as a specific motivation for identification as negro, it is important because it racializes Morelos as an Afro-descended space.

Family heritage and personal experiences also play a role in how people self-identify. For example, when asked this question, some residents responded, “I’m black because of my parents and my grandparents.” Other people, whom outsiders would label as non-black self-identified as such because of familial connections to people whose blackness is more visible. This indicates that physical characteristics such as complexion, hair texture, and facial features do not necessarily influence personal or perceived identification as negro in Morelos. While
some residents make distinctions between themselves and residents in other towns, there is still a clear identification as negro. For instance, it is commonly said that “The people in La Boquilla and Collantes are pure black”. On one level, this statement creates separation from blackness and implies that residents in Morelos embrace a mixed-race identity. However, in Morelos, the term negro is also used pejoratively to imply that someone has physical characteristics, such as dark skin and very curly or kinky hair, that are associated with black people who are less racially mixed. Thus, negro represents an ancestral, communal, and symbolic identity that connects people to this particular space.

The investigation will also discuss how negro identity is expressed through ethnographic interviews with residents. An important point that emerges from these interviews is that although it is clear that people identify as negro, it is difficult to determine specifically how this identity is expressed outside of art and cultural dances that are African influenced. Other aspects of the culture, such as food, dress, kinship ties, and labor are more expressive of a regional identity than a racial one. Further research and a larger interview sample are required to engage this issue more closely.
The second concept of analysis is place. The conversation surrounding place is grounded in the idea that it is connected to various levels of identity, i.e. racial, national, regional, gender, etc. as well as historical and contemporary circumstances that have shaped people’s perception of place. Margaret Somerville states, “place as a concept bridges the local and the global...the material and the symbolic, the individual and the collective”.  

By incorporating a dialogue about place, the project locates Afro-descendants in Mexico in the larger trajectory of subjugated Afro-descendants in other parts of the world as well as other members of minority populations. Moreover, an analysis of place provides an understanding of experiences from people within that place and how these experiences impact their understanding of themselves. Given that participant-observation is a central component of the dissertation project’s methodology, place as a conceptual framework is also utilized enable the researcher to understand how their positionality influences their experiences/interactions during field work. This aspect is especially important because the researcher’s positionality and

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ability to adapt and be flexible in an unfamiliar place can either enrich or limit their overall experience. An analysis of place also considers the ways in which place is understood or represented and how historic conditions exist or inform the present.¹²

Another relevant examination of place that is relevant to the analysis is Arturo Escobar’s Territories of Difference, which connects the significance of place and space in creating and perpetuating regional differences. He contends that “the politics of place can be seen as an emergent form of politics, a novel political imaginary in that it asserts a logic of difference and possibility that builds on the multiplicity of actions at the level of everyday life”.¹³ This definition of place is useful in an examination of how place functions with other factors, such as racial and national identity construction to shape people’s overall socioeconomic experience. It also explains how people living in such regions become “ghettoized” and placed at the periphery of the global economy, which specifically describes the current reality for people in Morelos, Oaxaca.

¹² Sefa Dei and Simmons, “Writing Diasporic Indigeneity”, 299.

Similar to Laura Lewis’ investigation in *Chocolate and Corn Flour*, this dissertation seeks to “contribute to the collective knowledge of the Costa Chica, which is otherwise little documented” by “establish[ing] the meaning of morenoness through an analyses of local discourse about race and place”.\textsuperscript{14} Giving particular attention to a regional discourse of identity offers insight into how Morelos fits into a larger discussion of the Costa Chica as well as specifics that distinguishes it from other towns in the region. Overall, place as a conceptual framework centralizes multiple manifestations of identity discourse and promotes interpretation of these discourses that reveal everyday experiences within that place.

**The Self (the Researcher and the Researched)**

The second concept to be examined is the self, both the researcher and the researched. This method is employed because it locates the researcher within the investigation and relates how the researched, or subjects, understand their positionality as well as the researcher’s. The self is important when writing through the personal because it indicates to the reader the writer’s perspective of the research, meaning what brought the writer to this particular time, place, and space.\textsuperscript{15} The idea of

\textsuperscript{14} Laura A. Lewis, *Chocolate and Corn Flour*, 13.
incorporating the self as an analytical concept is grounded in Sefa Dei and Simmons’ “Writing Diasporic Indigeneity” which argues that “the search for humanness through research can only be effective if we start locating ourselves and noting the methodological implications”.¹⁶ Rather than maintain distance from the study, this argument encourages researchers to have personal investment in the study, and connect with the subjects. Questions to be engaged during an analysis of the self are how the researcher comes to be known within the study and the possibilities and limitations when engaging the self as a conceptual framework.

An examination of the self allows for participant-observation during field work and employs the researcher to consider how their presence impacts the investigation. The self is also employed as a conceptual framework to challenge the notion that an appropriate approach to writing history must be objective. Because the researcher is required to consider the ways in which their personal subjectivity and presence influences the research, it is impossible to remain objective and distance oneself from the investigation. Living among the subject population also furthers the impossibility of

¹⁵ Sefa Dei and Simmons, “Writing Diasporic Indigeneity.

¹⁶ Ibid, 297.
objectivity. This particular approach to writing history enriches the connection between the historical and the contemporary and expands our understanding of historical processes and present institutions. Moreover, it intends to move away from the customary attitude that historical writing is stoic and unemotionally detached by presenting a narrative that not only engages the experiences of the subjects and the impact of the investigation, but also highlights the impact of the investigation on the researcher and how their perspective on issues such as race, poverty, and politics has been altered as a result of the study. Overall, the self as a conceptual framework challenges the researcher to analyze their personal subjectivity in ways that they would not consider outside of the study.

My particular subjectivity as an Afro-descended person is important because it creates space for a discussion about transnational experiences, interpretations, and representations related to black identity. Conversations such as these facilitate cross-cultural understanding and exchange and contribute to the broader discourse of the relationship between black identity, politics, and power in the African Diaspora. While this discussion could also occur between subjects and researchers from non Afro-descended backgrounds, my subjectivity
changes the conversation by personalizing it rather than making it abstract. At the same time, my status as a U.S. citizen distances me from participants because it is an indication of class privilege that grants me access to social, political, and economic resources that are inaccessible to them. It is assumed that my U.S. citizenship affords me the luxury to pursue higher education, travel within and outside of the U.S., live in a nice home with running water and electricity, own a nice car, and have nice clothing. On one level, this assumption is inaccurate and does not take into account racial, class, and gender divisions within the U.S. However, after traveling to Mexico over the last three years, I have realized that while in my view I may be underprivileged as a Black woman in the U.S., in Mexico, and in particular in Morelos, Oaxaca, I am of the privileged class. I have a graduate degree; I have never been without shelter, running water, electricity, or food; I have access to healthcare; I live in an urban area, and I have traveled to other countries. These experiences are not common for people in Morelos primarily due to poverty and lack of government interest in providing access to social programs that would facilitate access to these resources. For these reasons, I must engage and analyze the historical and current circumstances for people in Morelos as well as tell my personal narrative as an educated Black woman from the U.S. who was
fortunate enough to spend time in a welcoming community of Afro-descended Mexicans.

The Nation

The final concept to be examined is the nation. An examination of the nation in an analysis of race is necessary because it influences identification with or away from a particular identity. Race is also relevant in shaping national institutions and structures that have an active role in determining the quality of life for citizens within a nation. As Balibar and Wallerstein argue, “‘nation’ and ‘people’ [are] historical constructs, by means of which current institutions and antagonisms can be projected into the past to confer a relative stability on the communities on which the sense of individual ‘identity’ depends”. 17 This has particular resonance for Afro-descendants in Morelos in that it describes their complex relationship with the nation-state as marginalized citizens who embrace both their national identity, and understand that it challenges their ethnic identity.

Further validation of the inextricable link between race and the construction of national identity is discussed in David Theo Goldberg’s The Racial State, which argues that “race is

17 Étienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, Race, Nation, Class, 10.
integral to the emergence, development, and transformations of the modern nation-state”.\textsuperscript{18} Goldberg’s argument explains how race is articulated through the state and manifests in ways that create socioeconomic divisions. More importantly, this argument makes it clear that all citizens are racialized, including those who benefit from racially influenced state processes. In Mexican national identity formation, the racialization of Afro-Mexicans denies their presence, while at the same time limits their socioeconomic and political mobility. While Afro-Mexicans are not the only racial group adversely affected by racially influenced state processes, considering that Mexican national discourse generally avoids any discussion about race, the presence of other racial groups, such as indigenous and Chinese are at the very least acknowledged. This suggests that Mexican national identity is fashioned in a particular way that excludes racial “others”, but further marginalizes blacks by denying their presence, which automatically stigmatizes them as un-Mexican.

Goldberg further argues that “liberalism has served to make possible discursively, to legitimate ideologically, and to rationalize politico-economically prevailing sets of racially

ordered conditions and racist exclusions”.

This contention is central to understanding how race became associated with the nation-state as well as how it became ingrained in the foundation of numerous societies. The project of modernity is inherently racist and seeks to perpetuate racial hierarchies while maintaining that all citizens have equal socioeconomic and political rights. This particular argument resonates with the objectives and development of the cultural missionary program in Mexico during the 1920’s and 1930’s. Theoretically, this government-sponsored social program was supposed to help equalize historical socioeconomic and political disparities after the revolution between the landed elite, which was primarily composed of European descended Mexicans, and the landless working-class, which was largely indigenous and other racial minorities. However, in the final analysis, this program reinforced historical inequities and further marginalized indigenous people. Although the impacts of the program were not all positive, it is relevant that the government gave no attention to Afro-descended Mexican communities and excluded them from the program. This exclusion supports Goldberg’s argument that race is directly connected to the state because it influences the type of projects that it chooses to pursue.

Goldberg further argues that power is a central component to state projects and its interaction with citizens because “the state acquires its specificity as a state by virtue of being constituted in and through powers which the state at once embodies”.\textsuperscript{20} Goldberg’s analysis of how power functions in relation to the state further solidifies that race is critical in state processes because racial hierarchies determine which citizens have power and which do not.

Goldberg also asserts that gender is also a central tool in promoting state projects. In his analysis, race and gender are intertwined, given the history of European expansion in the New World and the crafting of independent governments that recognized citizenship based on socioeconomic and political factors as well as gender. He argues that “bodies are governed, colonially and postcolonially, through their constitutive positioning as racially engendered and in the gendering of their racial configuration”.\textsuperscript{21} In the case of Mexico, gender is imperative in understanding national discourse and identity formation, specifically in regard to power dynamics. Race along with gender must be engaged in a meaningful way that analyzes its role in determining who is represented and recognized as a

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, 9.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, 99.
citizen and how this influences what socioeconomic resources are available to them.

Benedict Anderson’s theory of nationalism presented in *Imagined Communities* is also relevant to the discussion of the nation. Anderson’s interpretation of the nation and nationalism in regard to Latin America presents some issues which will be discussed in the next chapter, but his contention that the nation is “imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” is significant.22 The conception of Mexico as a unified nation of mestizos and a society without racial discrimination negates the subjugation of Afro-descendants and implies their exclusion in the imagination of the national community. Central questions to be answered in relationship to the nation and national identity are how Afro-descendants in Morelos understand themselves as Mexican citizens and how this impacts their identification with blackness.

**Research Questions**

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1. How are racial “others’’ represented in the cultural missionaries’ documents and how do these representations contribute to their socioeconomic status?

2. How is this information relevant to constructions of citizenship, individual rights, and Mexican identity?

3. What does it mean to be black or moreno in Morelos? What historical and contemporary conditions have influenced an identification with black or moreno identity?

4. What role do women occupy in local politics; particularly in the Afro-descended social movement in Morelos?

5. What are the particular ways in which the marginalization of Afro-descended people affects women specifically?

**Research Site**

Jose Maria Morelos is located on the Pacific Coast of Oaxaca in a region known as the Costa Chica. It shares a municipality with the towns Santa Maria Huazolochitlán and Jamiltepec, both predominantly indigenous communities. The town is rural with little to no social or economic infrastructure. There are no banks, restaurants, large grocery stores, or hospitals. Travel to Pinotepa Nacional is required if these services are needed. The majority of residents work as farmers, cutting papaya, coconut, corn, and other produce, or work at home as small shopkeepers, or make goods such as cheese, tortillas, and pastries. Some people also run home meat markets.
butchering chickens, cows, or pigs. The lack of economic development in terms of jobs is a severe problem, exacerbated by the poor educational system. Consequently, the economic dilemmas cannot be resolved without investment in education. Lack of infrastructure also explains the few paved roads in Morelos are riddled with potholes and not well maintained. Roads are covered with animal excrement from horses and donkeys, and stray cats and dogs, which remains in the street. No public sanitation makes litter in public area a problem. Unpaved roads and a subpar sewage system allows water from heavy rain to accumulate, making travel to certain parts of town difficult without a vehicle. Heavy rain also causes flooding in people’s homes and brings strong winds, which causes trees to fall and cause temporary, but frequent, power outages.

In addition to people adversely affected by environmental and socioeconomic factors, living conditions betray poverty in Morelos. Most homes are made of cement with have concrete floors and tin roofs. These homes are more expensive and attract more heat, but are more durable against damage from flooding, strong winds, and earthquakes. Some people in Morelos cannot afford this much. Some homes are made of barro, a mud-like material which holds the wooden-stick frame of the house together. These homes are less expensive and hold less heat, but susceptible to damage from environmental factors. The size
of homes varies but multiple people commonly share one room. Bathrooms are usually detached from the house and do not have running water. People bathe and wash dishes with water from a well. This water is also used to flush toilet and wash clothes. Overall, the living conditions in Morelos reflect the degree to which poverty and lack of access to resources impact people’s lives and are an indication of their status as citizens in the national discourse.

The town’s oral tradition argues that it was founded by slaves who escaped from haciendas, although it has been difficult to find historical documents to confirm. The town was originally named Poza Verde and after the Mexican Revolution became known as Morelos. The oral tradition also claims that people living in Poza Verde participated in the revolution with Emiliano Zapata, who is believed to have been Afro-descended, against Venustiano Carranza. No one knows specifically when the town was renamed, but it is certain that it was named after the Independence hero Jose Maria Morelos, who was also Afro-descended.

**Terminology**

The terms *moreno*, *negro*, Afro-descended, and Afro-Mexican will be used throughout the dissertation. They can have various

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23 An additional trip to the Archivo General Nacíon in Mexico City is needed to further research this information.
meanings depending on the context, but for the purposes of this project, they will be employed in the following manner:

Laura Lewis argues that the term moreno “racially signifies historical and ongoing mixture, which translates into a fluidity that enables morenos to both identify with and to distinguish themselves from Indians. It also separates Indians and morenos, (and, by extension, blacks) from whites”. Lewis problematizes the use of black, Afro-Mexican, and Afro-Mestizo as terms because she suggests they conflict with moreno identities, I use the terms negro and Afro-descended interchangeably. I acknowledge that moreno and negro specifically reflect the historical and contemporary experiences of people in the Costa Chica. However, the term Afro-descended, places them within the larger discourse of struggles for socioeconomic and political recognition throughout the African Diaspora. Afro-descended is also commonly used in academic and political spaces by those involved in the mobilization process for civil rights. Because these terms will also be relevant to the analysis of the interviews, I will note when interview participants use them in a way that differs from the initial definition. The term Afro-mestizo will also be mentioned when referring to some interviews, but will not be employed by the author because, as

24 Lewis, Chocolate and Corn Flour, 6.
argued by historian Ben Vinson III, it validates “the importance that Mexican academics give to mestizaje, which is consistent with prevailing nationalist constructions of Mexico as a mestizo nation, and limits parallels between ‘these Afro-mestizos’ and ‘those blacks’ in other parts of the Diaspora.” Since an objective of the dissertation is to understand how Afro-descended Mexicans’ interactions with the State have shaped their experiences and how this fits into the larger trajectory of Afro-descended struggle in the Diaspora, I do not make distinctions that suggest Afro-descended Mexicans are not included in the African Diaspora.

Other terms relevant to this discussion are indigenous or indígena, which refers to people whose ancestry in Mexico predates the Spanish Conquest and live in enclave communities with people of similar ancestry and do not practice Spanish social and cultural customs. The term mestizo refers to people of mixed indigenous and Spanish ancestry and are considered mainstream due to an acceptance of modern social and cultural practices.


26 For further discussion on meanings of indígena and mestizo, see Alan Knight, “Racism, Revolution, and Indigenismo: Mexico 1910-1940”. in The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870-1940 (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1990).
Chapter 2: Replanting the Third Root: Reflections on the Development and Trajectory of Afro-Mexican Studies

This chapter discusses the foundation of Afro-Mexican Studies as an area of academic inquiry and trends within scholarship related to this field. Primary to the discussion is an analysis of historical literature, engaging topics that are addressed, questions that are considered, and areas requiring further development. The chapter also highlights the transformation of Afro-Mexican Studies from proving that Afro-descended people existed in Mexico during the colonial period to examining their experiences beyond slavery, their interactions with social, political, and economic institutions, and racial discourse within Afro-descended or moreno communities.

Providing a literature review of studies on Afro-descendants in Mexico contextualizes the project’s purpose as well as the contribution it intends to make to the field.

Chapter 3: Nationalizing Racism: Government Sponsored Modernization through Formal and Social Education in Oaxaca 1920s-1930s

Chapter three focuses on the activities of cultural missionaries in Oaxaca during the 1920’s. While modernization efforts through social and formal education were predominantly
implemented in indigenous communities located in the northern part of Oaxaca, I argue that observations from cultural missionaries related to social and educational conditions are indicative of a particular construction of Mexican identity that promotes *mestizaje*. The exclusion of *morenos* from this state sponsored initiative suggests that blackness along with indigeneity is otherized, the primary difference is that *morenos* lack visibility. The chapter will also examine the implications of Afro-descended peoples’ exclusion particularly in the community of Morelos, and how this relates to racial and national identity construction.

Chapter 4: “Somos de Morelos”: Race, Place, and Claims to National Identity in Morelos, Oaxaca

This chapter will consider the historical and current significance of racial and national identity construction in Morelos, Oaxaca. The analysis will examine the particular historical legacy of race and claims to citizenship and how this contributed to existing social conditions. Primary to the discussion is an analysis of how residents identify racially, factors that influence their self-identification, how this relates to their socioeconomic status and the general social conditions in the town. This information is relayed through formal interviews and informal interactions with residents in Morelos during summer 2012 and summer 2013 that provide insight
into specific issues, such as poverty, teen pregnancy, illiteracy, and no access to healthcare. As will be discussed in chapter four, these issues, along with overall lack of federal recognition as a population, explain the motivations for local political mobilization to elevate Afro-descended culture and gain visibility to demand access to government sponsored socioeconomic resources.

Chapter 5: Expanding Ideas of Mexicanidad: Possibilities for Government Recognition of Afro-Mexicans as a Population

The chapter will discuss barriers to federal recognition from the perspective of Afro-descended people who are actively engaged in grassroots mobilization as well as individuals from organizations that assist in advocacy for this population, and how barriers impact social, political, and economic mobility. Critical questions related to establishing a connection between the denial of black people’s presence and how they exist in contemporary society become apparent when one considers expanding definitions of Mexicanidad (Mexican-ness). For instance, what would be the significance of Afro-Mexicans being granted land rights, protected based on their status as a historically marginalized group? Also, what new socioeconomic and political opportunities could be gained by including Afro-Mexican, or black as a specific category in the federal census? While on the surface this may appear to promote division and de-
emphasize national identity, I argue that it is no more divisive than prevailing constructions of Mexican identity. Thus the dynamics of race and national identity necessitate that Mexicanidad be reconstructed to include blackness in a way that reflects the significance of Afro-descended Mexicans to the nation’s history and encourages a dialogue about race and racism.

Chapter 6: Conclusion - Locating Blackness in Mexico: Solidifying Connections between Research, Scholarship, and Activism

The final chapter looks ahead at advances in increasing Afro-descended Mexicans’ visibility through avenues such as social media, documentary films, and scholarly research. Prominent Latin American and U.S. scholars influence existing investigations by shaping emerging scholars’ research. Also addressed is the significance of establishing international networks of scholars, activists, and others interested in learning about Afro-descended people throughout Latin America. The chapter also encourages the reader to consider how information about Afro-Mexican History can be applied to present issues in the United States, such as improving Black and Latino relations. Activities of the researcher to promote education about Afro-Mexican history, culture, and identity are also described. The chapter concludes with a discussion of upcoming
projects for future research and methods to engage people outside of academic settings.
CHAPTER 2

REPLANTING THE THIRD ROOT: REFLECTIONS ON THE DEVELOPMENT AND TRAJECTORY OF AFRO-MEXICAN STUDIES

Global Africa, the geographically and socio-culturally diverse peoples of Africa and its Diaspora, is linked through complex networks of social relationships and processes. Whether examined at the level of the household, neighborhood, village, city, province, state, or region, the experiences of these dispersed peoples are multilayered, interactively varied, and complex, and yet constituted of and mediated within a global and unequal social ordering system.

-Ruth Simms Hamilton, Routes of Passage, 2006

Introduction

Scholarly investigations of black populations in Latin America are becoming more prevalent as the historical and continued oppression of these groups is made visible through social activism and other forms of resistance throughout the region.¹ The recent PBS documentary series Black in Latin America with Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and its companion book of the same title has placed a spotlight on the history of blacks in Latin America, taking the discussion of blackness in that

¹ For recent discussion on the present condition of black populations in Latin America and its relationship to social resistance, see the following texts: Leith Mullings, New Social Movements in the African Diaspora: Challenging Global Apartheid. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), Ben Vinson III and Matthew Restall, Black Mexico: Race and Society from Colonial to Modern Times. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 2009), Peter Wade, Race and Sex in Latin America. (New York: Pluto Press, 2009), and Peter Wade, Race and Ethnicity in Latin America. (New York: Pluto Press, 2010).
part of the world out of academic classrooms, books, and conferences, making it more accessible to the general public.\textsuperscript{2} Mexico, one of the countries profiled in the documentary, has become a popular place to examine the “hidden” or “forgotten” presence of black people in Latin America, evolving into its own field of academic study.

The foundation of Afro-Mexican studies began in 1946 with the publication of Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán’s groundbreaking study \textit{La Población Negra de México}. His primary purpose for composing this was to provide historical evidence that proved the existence of Afro-descended people in Mexico, the magnitude of Mexico’s participation in the slave trade, and the indigenous ethnic origins of blacks.\textsuperscript{3} Beltrán’s quantitative analysis of the African slave trade in Mexico significantly influenced subsequent investigations that have raised questions concerning race, nationalism, identity, cultural retention, and social mobility. These subsequent investigations have been fundamental in transforming the field of Afro-Mexican studies in terms of what questions are examined, what sources are engaged and how these sources are interpreted, and what conclusions can be drawn


from the analysis. At the same time, these investigations have also challenged some of Beltrán’s arguments and brought forth relevant critiques of his methodological approaches. As such, this chapter will provide a literary review that traces the development of racial and national identity theories in Mexican history to reveal why the presence of Afro-descended people has been diminished. Additionally, the chapter will discuss primary themes in recent publications on Afro-Mexicans and identify areas that require further inquiry.

**Trajectory of Mexican Historical Literature**

Taken as a whole, primary debates within the discourse of Mexican history either ignore or give scant attention to the presence of Afro-descended people. For the most part, this is because dominant themes in master narratives of Mexican historiography tend to follow three research tracks, all of which are grounded in theoretical frameworks that lack consideration of the social, economic, and political impacts of racial hierarchies stemming from the colonial period. The first track includes texts that emphasize the significance of nineteenth century nationalism originating from the independence movement as a result of the Creole/Spanish dichotomy. Scholarship within this track highlight class divisions as impediments to cultivating national identity but do not address racial disparities created by the *sistema de castas*. 
The second track consists of texts that view Mexico’s socioeconomic prospects during the Revolution as being linked to the acceptance of indigenismo as a form of revolutionary nationalism. Works in this category discuss the necessity of culturally assimilating the indigenous population, yet make no mention of how black people factor into this process. Finally, the third track contains texts that engage mestizaje as the ideal racial and cultural discourse that should be adopted not only in Mexico, but Latin America as a whole, to achieve socioeconomic and cultural superiority that exceeds that of the United States. The central idea from this body of literature is that distinct racial categories will be subsumed into one cosmic race resulting in a society without racism.

**Track One: The Emergence of a Nation**

Beginning with the first track, nationalism emerges as a significant lens to interpret Mexican history. Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* has gained recognition as the seminal text to engage in understanding how and why people begin to perceive themselves as belonging to a particular nation. At the time this text was published, it provided a much needed explanation for nationalism, which had initially been put forth in Marxist theory, but had yet to be defined. Anderson defines the nation as an imagined community whose members, despite the high probability that most of them will never interact with one
another, believe their existence within the same national boundary generates a shared identity and all members should be willing to protect the integrity of this identity.\textsuperscript{4}

Despite Anderson’s conclusion that the nation is an imaginary concept, he argues that economic, religious, educational, and political processes employed by the nation are not imagined as they are imperative to generating emotional attachment between the nation and its members.\textsuperscript{5} Although he provides useful insight into understanding the formation of nation-states, it is obvious that his analysis is only applicable to nationalist movements in Europe where the primary marker of difference was religion. Anderson’s perspective of nationalism cannot be transplanted to Latin America where markers of difference evolved from religion to class to race with the establishment of new societies.\textsuperscript{6}

Partially in response to Anderson’s critique of nationalism, Claudio Lomnitz’s \textit{Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico} refutes the contention that nations are imagined communities. Lomnitz and other scholars on Latin America strongly disagree with Anderson’s characterization of nationalism, believing it a


\textsuperscript{5} Benedict Anderson, \textit{Imagined Communities}, 23.

\textsuperscript{6} Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, \textit{Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism}. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 8-10.
misrepresentation of how nationalism evolved in Latin America. Lomnitz’s first criticism of Anderson is that although he identifies the eighteenth century as the point of nationalism’s invention, it was not necessarily associated with state sovereignty and carried ambiguous connotations that could be associated with territory or descent. Second, Lomnitz maintains that nationalism in Latin America did not necessarily produce a sense of horizontal comradery as Anderson suggests. Lastly, Lomnitz views Anderson’s emphasis on personal sacrifice as being the ultimate manifestation of nationalism as an oversimplification of “the coercive, moral, or economic force of other social relationships”.

Considering that Anderson’s synthesis is inapplicable to Mexico, Lomnitz proposes a new definition of the nation as a community that is imagined as fraternal among full citizens who function as mediators between those who are not recognized as full citizens and the state. Although Lomnitz does not specifically interrogate how Afro-Mexicans factor into the development of national identity in Mexico, his acknowledgement of the oppressive nature of socioeconomic and political

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7 Claudio Lomnitz-Adler, *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico*, 7.
8 Ibid, 7.
9 Ibid, 13.
relationships based on an imbalance of power, such as master-slave and gender dynamics, speaks directly to the condition of the Afro-Mexican population. For instance, Lomnitz identifies depth and silence as being essential tools in the process of nation-state formation, meaning that nations privilege certain cultural images while silencing others to promote national identity.\textsuperscript{10}

Building on the discussion of nationalism, D.A. Brading’s \textit{The Origins of Mexican Nationalism} adds another layer to the complexity of analyzing the development of nationalist rhetoric in Mexico. Further complicating Anderson’s theory that nationalism generates horizontal camaraderie, Brading asserts that national identity was secondary to Creole patriotism during the seventeenth century. Here is an example of how indicators of distinction transformed from religion to class, and the Christian versus non-Christian dichotomy was not as important as Creole versus peninsular. Considering that Creole patriotism developed in response to Spanish contentions that Creoles were inferior, and made into laws that discriminated against American born Spaniards, it is apparent that living within the same national boundary did not promote a shared national identity.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{11} D.A. Brading, \textit{The Origins of Mexican Nationalism}. (Cambridge, UK: Centre of Latin American Studies, 1985), 3.
As Brading describes, Creole patriotism was rooted in a shared class identity that rejected the Spanish Conquest and exalted the indigenous past. The conquest of the New World created different social, economic, and political issues that complicated national identity within these societies. Overall, Brading’s historiography of how nationalism developed in Mexico indicates that viewing the construction of nation-states from Anderson’s perspective is historically inaccurate and leads to oversimplified generalizations.

Lomnitz and Brading posit a counter-narrative that not only disrupts mainstream accounts, but also rewrites history from the perspective of those who have historically been outside of the mainstream. This information relates to Afro-Mexicans studies in that it represents a historical narrative that is not equivalent to Anderson’s dominant narrative, nor provides a complete analysis of the oppressive nature of national identity. Studies specifically focused on the Afro-Mexican population intend to fill existing gaps within historical texts discussing the socioeconomic and political development of Mexican society.

**Track Two: Crafting National Identity**

As the literature progresses from the pre-Independence period, the objective of the second research track indicates
that the Porfiriato (1876-1910) and Revolution of 1910 introduced additional layers of socioeconomic and political complexity for Mexican citizens to endure. Whereas nineteenth century Creole patriots were engaged in conflicts with Spanish elites over independence, early twentieth century revolutionary insurgents were concerned with ending the elitist and oppressive thirty year regime of Porfirio Díaz and constructing a democratic government. Once Díaz was overthrown and exiled, numerous factions among the insurgents began to emerge as leaders. Venustiano Carranza, Pancho Villa, Emilliano Zapata, and Alvaro Obregón disagreed over issues such as agrarian reform, separation of church and state, and labor rights.\textsuperscript{12} The current social and political climate was influential in producing academic scholarship that reflected on how Mexico could move forward and unify around a collective national identity considering that the Revolution revealed significant circumstances that separated its citizens.

One of the leading intellectuals who articulated Mexico’s challenges to achieving a uniform national consciousness was Manuel Gamio. His emphasis on the importance of culture and his interest in promoting anthropological investigations has earned him the title of the “Father of Mexican anthropology”. In his

\textsuperscript{12} Michael J. Gonzales, \textit{The Mexican Revolution 1910-1940.} (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002).
groundbreaking 1916 manifesto, *Forjando Patria*, Gamio discusses the significance of national culture and highlights his views on the obstacles to its creation. Gamio’s conception of a nation is contingent on all citizens sharing a common culture, language, ethnic background, and historical memory. From his perspective, the most pressing hindrance to achieving this goal is what he characterizes as “the Indian problem”. He believes that pervasive illiteracy, lack of education, and poverty among the indigenous population impedes efforts toward national unity because it forces Indians to live in enclave communities. Consequently, Gamio contends that the success of constructing a unified national society lies in the cultural assimilation of Indians. At the same time, indigenous culture is also central to Gamio’s idea of Mexican national culture, a fusion that resulted from the indigenous past and the Spanish Conquest. While Gamio’s passion for the well-being of the indigenous population is symbolic, his failure to include Afro-descended people in his dream for a better society gives credence to the contention that mainstream texts on Mexican history do not consider the presence of black people.

Historian Alan Knight counters some of Gamio’s ideas in *Forjando Patria* by focusing attention to the racism and

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paternalism inherent in the revolutionary indigenismo ideology. Knight’s essay “Racism, Revolution, and Indigenismo” argues that the end of the Porfiriato and birth of revolution gave the false notion that racism had been officially eradicated and social and political equity would be a priority. In Knight’s estimation, racism continued throughout the revolutionary regime, disguised in language that promoted indigenismo, characterized as nationalist rhetoric that appropriates Indian culture to exalt the mestizo as a national hero.14 Gamio’s Forjando Patria endorses such a perception of Indians in which they are objects that require guidance and active intervention from the mestizo population or they will remain shiftless and continue burdening society. Knight’s discussion of inherent racism and paternalism in indigenismo ideology raises questions concerning how Afro-Mexicans fit into this construct. So, scholars seem willing to deconstruct broadly accepted arguments regarding the indigenous population in Mexican history, but are to highlight similar issues and their consequences for Afro-descended people.

Track Three: Embracing Mestizaje

The Revolution also placed a spotlight on increased anti-
foreign sentiment in Mexico, especially in regard to cultural

and political influence from Britain and the United States. People throughout post-colonial Latin America began to analyze their socioeconomic condition in relation to Europe and the U.S. and came to the conclusion that their own path toward political and socioeconomic development would have to be different.\textsuperscript{15} We have seen that Mexico’s challenge, along with other Latin American nations moving into the twentieth century, was to unify a racially heterogeneous population after a century of conflict from Independence to the Revolution. Adopting an ideology of mestizaje that encouraged racial and cultural amalgamation was proposed as a solution to expedite the nation-building process.\textsuperscript{16} Mexico’s most prolific proponent of mestizaje, José Vasconcelos, served as Secretary of Education from 1921-1924 under President Alvaro Obregón, and played a critical role in developing how mestizaje would influence racial discourse and social relations in Mexico.

In his 1926 publication of \textit{La Raza Cósmica}, Vasconcelos capitalized on his influence as Secretary of Education by explaining how mestizaje could function as a revolutionary tool toward national unification. He creates a scenario in which

\textsuperscript{15} Marilyn Grace Miller, \textit{Rise and Fall of the Cosmic Race: The Cult of Mestizaje in Latin America} (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004), 4.

\textsuperscript{16} Marilyn Grace Miller, \textit{Rise and Fall of the Cosmic Race}, 4.
Latin America struggles to maintain cultural autonomy against white domination in the form of U.S. and European imperialism. In his view, opportunities for foreign exploitation of Latin American nations are maximized by emphases on separate regional identities rather than a shared Pan-Latin identity. The Anglo-Saxon powers rose to dominance because they denied socioeconomic and political access to the “lower races” in contrast to Latin America, where lower races were assimilated into the Spanish population.\textsuperscript{17} Vasconcelos concludes that Spanish America has a unique destiny to lead mankind into a higher state in which the white, black, Indian, and Asian races would merge to produce a cosmic super race.\textsuperscript{18} Echoed by intellectuals in other parts of Latin America, his idea influenced social, economic, and political policy.

Edward Telles argues in Race in Another America, that initially race relations in Brazil were ingrained in white supremacy through the study of Eugenics. The concept of racial democracy emerged as “scholars accepted the racist predictions of black and mulatto inferiority but thought this inferiority

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\textsuperscript{17} José Vasconcelos, La Raza Cósmica: A bilingual edition (Baltimore, MD.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 17.
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\textsuperscript{18} José Vasconcelos, La Raza Cósmica, 17.
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could be overcome by miscegenation".\footnote{Edward E. Telles, \textit{Race in Another America: The Significance of Skin Color in Brazil} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 28.} According to Telles, racial democracy became the defining framework for race relations in the 1910s and 1920s. Its most notable scholar Gilberto Freye, argued that “Brazilian society was free of the racism that affected the rest of the world” due to its unique racial and cultural mixing.\footnote{Edward E. Telles, \textit{Race in Another America}, 33.} But the concept of a super race is inherently racist as it presupposes that only way to combat racism is to subsume racial “others” into the dominant group. More importantly, Vasconcellos’s theory paints an ahistorical picture of racial discourse in Mexico that erases the legacy of African slavery and the racial caste system, in effect limiting the presence of Afro-descended people in Mexico to the colonial period and omiting them from the nation-building process.

Subsequent literature published on the significance of mestizaje in the construction of Mexico’s national image offers similar critiques of \textit{La Raza Cósmica}. For example, \textit{José Vasconcelos and the Writing of the Mexican Revolution} by Luis A. Marentes characterizes the concept of a cosmic race as racially essentialist and teleological. Marentes’s justification for this critique is that Vasconcelos’s theory “did not really reflect a sincere desire to have the racial traits of all
peoples blended together” and instead, anticipated “that those traits [he] considered inferior would be absorbed and lost in the sea of genes of the superior types”. Based on this analysis, Marentes concludes that La Raza Cósmica ultimately constructs a national image of the “ideal” citizen while simultaneously excluding identities it classifies as counterproductive to supporting its larger cause. Among the excluded identities are what Vasconcelos considers to be “lower races” - black, Indian, and Asian, as well as identities that create space for a discussion of gender dynamics. In this respect, Marentes takes issue with Vasconcelos’ perspective on the Spanish Conquest, which he argues romanticizes the subjugation of women and presents sexual relationships established on an imbalance of power as consensual. This critique is essential because it highlights the significance of the intersection of race and gender for women of color. Taking Marentes’ point further, Vasconcelos plays out his fantasy of a cosmic super race on the bodies of women who have been historically oppressed and continues to silence their particular experience in the larger discourse of Mexican history.


22 Luis A. Marentes, José Vasconcelos, 97.
Further indication of the necessity to consider gender as a conceptual framework in analyzing nationalist projects can be found in Nancy Leys Stepan’s *The Hour of Eugenics*. Stepan begins by historicizing the development of eugenics and its insertion into the social and political fabric in Latin America, particularly Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico. Her examination shows eugenics philosophy fundamental to Vasconcelos’s theory of a cosmic race and significantly influenced the type of nationalist projects he advocated. At the core of eugenics is an emphasis on the transmission of a particular national image through reproduction, which is perceived as a woman’s primary role. In the context of race relations and the viability of the nation’s legacy, sexual unions acquire more saliency in that they allow for either the maintenance or transgression of racial boundaries. Stepan argues that the fear of the nation’s mestizo image being contaminated through racial mixing “produced intrusive proposals or prescriptions for new state policies toward individuals”.

Considering that Vasconcelos’s theory is grounded in eugenics, race and gender are inextricably linked to national

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24 Nancy Leys Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics*, 104.

identity as described in *La Raza Cosmica*. However, Stepan’s indication that nationalist projects encouraged selective reproduction destroys Vasconcelos’s romanticized version of how the Spanish Conquest influenced more lenient attitudes toward racial amalgamation in Latin America as opposed to the United States. Furthermore, Vasconcelos’s prediction of a comic super race that includes the best characteristics from each race is also invalidated. Stepan shows that Vasconcelos assumed black people would eventually disappear since no one would want to mate with a group that had been labeled inferior.\(^{26}\) Although black people obviously did not physically disappear, the creation of an ideal Mexican citizen venerated through the *mestizo* image and advocated by intellectuals like Gamio and Vasconcelos, made it possible for black people to be erased from national memory, essentially making them invisible.

**Uncovering the “Third Root”’: Early Beginnings of Afro-Mexican Scholarship**

The concerted effort by revolutionary nationalists to suppress racially distinct identities posed a significant challenge to ethnologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán when he began researching Mexico’s participation in the slave trade. The 1946 publication *La Población Negra de México* proved a springboard

\(^{26}\) Ibid, 150-151.
for future scholars on Afro-Mexico and is still considered a seminal text in the field. While Beltrán was not the first to publish an investigation about the Afro-descended population in Mexico, his text is considered significant because it established Afro-Mexico as a legitimate field of scholarship, even if the implications of some of his arguments are problematic due to affirmations that mestizaje was successful in erasing racial and ethnic divisions and unifying all Mexican citizens. Ben Vinson III argues that Beltrán’s La Población Negra de México “views the history of blacks as a history of assimilation and integration, with the ultimate goal to achieve a better understanding how the mestizo developed in Mexican history.” By arguing that blacks have assimilated into Mexican society, Beltrán promotes the legacy of mestizaje and confines black presence to the colonial and pre-independence eras while simultaneously erasing them from the contemporary mainstream. Furthermore, Beltrán’s analysis is problematic because as one of the paramount texts in the field, by providing a starting point for future investigations and setting the tone for methodological and analytical approaches that would be applied to this field of study. Although Beltrán provided

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27 Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, La población negra de México.

28 Ben Vinson III and Bobby Vaughn, Afroméxico. (Mexico City, Mexico: Fundo de Cultura Económica, 2004), 56.
groundbreaking and significant evidence to support the presence of blacks in Mexico, subsequent scholars of Afro-Mexico have questioned some of his arguments and continue to create new interpretations of Afro-descended Mexicans’ past and present experiences to further develop the field.

Given the impact of La Población Negra de México, it is common to overlook the importance of other investigations that were published around the same time, particularly, Carlos Bausari’s “La Población Negroide Mexicana”. While this publication is a synthesis of primary arguments in Beltran’s manuscript, its impact was still valuable in furthering discussion about Afro-descended Mexicans. Bausari defines the status of official racial politics in Mexico by the government’s assertion that racial discrimination does not exist and argues that this official stance influences the lack of cultural, economic, and social statistical information available for the Afro-descended population.²⁹ The objectives of the study are to discuss the cultural origins of blacks in Mexico, their historical and current social status, geographic regions in which they live, and cultural characteristics that make them distinct from other ethnic groups. While Bausari’s article does

not contain original research, its contribution to historical literature on Afro-Mexico is still important to note.

Whereas Beltrán’s challenge was proving the existence of blacks in Mexico and the nation’s participation in the African slave trade, subsequent scholars have been charged with uncovering how the black population fits into the larger context of Mexican society. As Afro-Mexican studies began to expand and eventually gained recognition as a legitimate field of academic inquiry, scholars developed investigations further proving the existence of the black population. They also deconstructed dominant narratives.

Colin Palmer’s *Slaves of the White God*, which followed the publication of Beltrán’s text more than fifty years later, is evidence of the magnitude of Beltrán’s influence and the importance of reinserting people of African descent into Mexican history. *Slaves of the White God* is a quantitative analysis of the Atlantic Slave Trade and its particular impact in shaping the social, political, and economic construction of society in Mexico during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Whereas Beltrán’s primary concern was proving the existence of Africans in Mexico and documenting their ethnic origins, Palmer discusses how Afro-Mexicans’ social status as slaves affected their interaction with the Church, the State, and the formation of a
complex system of social and economic relationships. According to Vinson III, an important contribution of this text is Palmer’s contention “that possibly a larger quantity of slaves had been imported than indicated by previous studies, including Beltrán’s work which did not measure the importation of slaves to Veracruz.” Palmer’s critique indicates the extent to which studies on Afro-descended Mexicans had developed, analyzing more complex questions and becoming informed by diverse perspectives that had no investment in promoting dominant local legacies related to race and national identity.

More importantly, Palmer is interested in reconstructing how Afro-Mexicans lived in their private lives as well as methods used to resist their inferior status. By raising these issues, Palmer makes clear his intent to insert the history of African slavery in Mexico into the larger narrative of Black Studies and African Diaspora Studies. Although Palmer’s study is not in conversation with Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico, his connection of slavery in Mexico to the State and other powerful institutions such as the Catholic church further establishes that the presence of the Afro-Mexican population continues to be ignored and not given sufficient attention by mainstream


31 Ben Vinson III and Bobby Vaughn, Afroméxico, 64.
narratives, but also by so-called counter narratives that are supposed to disrupt dominant perspectives.

**Trajectory of Afro-Mexican Historical Literature**

Afro-Mexican Studies has experienced rapid growth in the last twenty years to gain recognition as a viable research area that significantly contributes to expanding the discussion on black populations in Latin America. As more studies are published, the types of questions scholars engage become more sophisticated and further establish that black people’s role in the social, political, and economic, construction of Mexican society extends beyond slavery. According to historian Vinson III, recent scholarship trends within Afro-Mexican studies follow three tracks and can be grouped into time periods: 1) colonial and independence era (1521-1821), 2) prerevolutionary era (1822-1910), and 3) post-revolutionary period (1921-present). Literature following the first track analyzes how blackness fits into the discourse of mestizaje and discusses the survival or transformation of African cultures. Texts within the second track engage the history of black people in Mexico to better understand processes of slavery and freedom in a global context. The third track examines how blackness fits into

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complex colonial and nation-state hierarchies. Important studies that emerge from these research tracks are studies that discuss regional variances in slavery, the importance of self-identity fashioning for black people, opportunities for political and social recognition, and the intersection of racial and national identity with the construction of gender dynamics. Each scholar’s contribution offers a more nuanced perspective of Mexico’s African heritage and further confirms that a discussion of blacks in Mexico has contemporary, not just historical significance.

Expanding on Palmer’s analysis of slavery in Mexico, Patrick Carroll’s Blacks in Colonial Veracruz explores the development of race and ethnicity in Veracruz, and the avenues through which Africans became central figures in the framework of early and late colonial society. Carroll’s analytical approach centers on uncovering slavery’s role in creating the social, political, and economic structure of society. He presents a regional perspective that provides an understanding of the evolution of regional variances in the nature of slavery, and articulations of race throughout the colonial period. Additionally, Carroll intends to place Afro-Mexicans within the larger context of colonial Veracruz by discussing their

interactions with other racial and class groups, allowing comparisons to be made between the implications of race, ethnicity, and class in a demographically heterogeneous population. These important arguments further dismantle contentions that Africans made no contributions to the development of Mexican society and establish that an examination of racial and class dynamics is central to any analysis of populations during the colonial period.

Contrary to other analyses of the independence movement, Carroll inserts blacks into Mexico’s political discourse and argues that they and other castas were the majority of participants in independence wars.34 This is significant because it expands interpretations of Mexican independence and nationalism beyond conflicts associated with peninsulares and creoles that have been given more credence in scholarship related to Mexican nationalism. In particular, Carroll’s perspective questions D.A. Brading’s examination of the development of Mexican nationalism omits the significance of race and slavery in shaping the independence movement.

Scholars of Afro-Mexico highlight differences in economic dependence on slavery based on geographic regions and also incorporate other frameworks besides race to draw conclusions

about the socioeconomic and political condition of Afro-Mexicans. Douglas Cope’s *The Limits of Racial Domination* explores the complexity of racial and class dynamics in Mexico City during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Cope does not dispute the oppressive nature of the racial caste system but argues that it is inaccurate to conclude that there was no room for negotiation or subversion of the racial hierarchy. Consequently, Cope proposes a new framework of analysis that considers “culture as a contested terrain”, and ethnic identity as representing “a social identity that may be reaffirmed, modified, manipulated, or perhaps even rejected”. These advances in research questions signify that scholars in Afro-Mexican studies have progressed from writing in conversation with early scholars to formulating a separate intellectual discourse within the field, a discourse not intended to contradict previous research studies, but meant to push the intellectual boundaries of the field and promote continued investigation into questions that have yet to be engaged.

Such a push regards the relevance of self-identity fashioning for black people in Mexico, and anthropologist Laura


A. Lewis’s “Blacks, Black Indians, Afromexicans” exemplifies the complex nature of discussing blackness in a contemporary context. This article examines the process of identity formation through interviews with residents living in San Nicolas Tolentino, a historically black village in Guerrero.37 Lewis focuses on this particular community because it is located in the area referred to as La Costa Chica (Guerrero and Oaxaca) and identified as a space in which the black presence is most visible. The most enlightening aspect of Lewis’s research is that despite the residents’ discernible black heritage, they identify as moreno to acknowledge their indigenous ancestry. According to Lewis, the residents’ self-identification is problematic given that the term moreno is inherently racist since its African element has been erased.

Further complicating a discussion of African heritage in contemporary Mexico, Lewis indicates that the residents perceive black identity as an imposition that conflicts with their national identity and contributes to their political and economic marginalization. While Lewis’s findings are not a positive endorsement toward arguing for Afro-Mexicans’ inclusion into the larger society, they do indicate how deeply racial...

ideologies such as *mestizaje* and *indigenismo* are ingrained into Mexico’s social and political fabric. Consequently, that these ideologies continue to have saliency and have been transmitted to citizens in contemporary Mexico is no surprise.

Lewis extends her discussion of the relationship between race, place, and identity construction in *Chocolate and Corn Flour*. Through an analysis of regional history, Lewis highlights how historical legacy, race, and place intersect to influence contemporary experiences of *morenos* in La Costa Chica. Focusing specifically on San Nicolás, Guerrero, Lewis argues that “morenos embrace Indianess in part because ‘the Indian is Mexican.’ Moreno therefore racially signifies historical and ongoing mixture, which translates into a fluidity that enables morenos to both identify with and distinguish themselves from Indians.” 38 Lewis further argues that the term moreno most accurately describes racial construction in San Nicolas because it symbolizes local discourse particular to the past, present, and future of people living within this space. Lewis also emphasizes the significance of terminology and problematizes terms such as Afro-Mexican and Afro-descended as being representative of academic discourse employed to suggest a broad, singular black identity. Her justification for this

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position is that terms such as these “conflict with moreno identities, and the goals of activism do not correspond to San Nicoladenses’ particular concerns with migration and holding together their families and community.”

Although Lewis’s investigation centers on Guerrero, her utilization of race and place as conceptual frameworks has broader implications for the study of Afro-descended people in other parts of Mexico.

Other studies related to self-identity fashioning offer varying conclusions in regard to contemporary Afro-Mexicans’ identification with blackness. For example, anthropologist Bobby Vaughn’s dissertation provides an ethnographic study of the impact that nationalist ideologies, specifically mestizaje and indigenismo have on racial construction. In “Race and Nation: A Study of Blackness in Mexico”, Vaughn describes how the legacy of slavery and national discourses has affected Mexicans of African descent and resulted in a denial of their existence and marginalization. However, despite the influence of national ideologies to discourage racial diversity, Vaughn contends that there are significant movements at the grassroots level pushing for government recognition of Afro-Mexicans and encourage the assertion of black identity. Vaughn refutes

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39 Laura A. Lewis, Chocolate and Cornflour, 9.
common perceptions that African heritage in Mexico is limited to the colonial period and raises questions concerning why this population continues to be ignored by mainstream society as well the Mexican government. Additionally, Vaughn’s dissertation confirms that mestizaje and indigenismo were not intended to eradicate racial divisions, but rather to perpetuate them and make it possible for Mexico to be characterized as a non-racist nation.

While La Costa Chica is often engaged in analyses of the Afro-Mexico population in a contemporary setting, the state of Veracruz is another focal point and provides a comparative perspective of the magnitude of mestizaje’s impact. Ethnographer Christina Sue’s dissertation, “Race and National Ideology in Mexico” examines the centrality of color in promoting national ideology that encourages race mixture. Sue’s objective is to reveal the significance of racist discourse and the meaning of blackness for Afro-Mexicans in Veracruz. While Sue engages the role mestizaje has in shaping racial identity, she argues that in terms of Veracruz, it is not embraced in a way that the founders of the nation intended. According to her


analysis, mestizaje is adopted as a strategy to “whiten” within the racially mixed category. Some people view mestizaje as an opportunity to “upgrade” to an identity that is inclusive of other racial groups, such as moreno or pardo, but at the same time, is not exclusive to black identity in the same way as negro. Sue’s analysis further reveals that while people in Veracruz tend to avoid discussions of racial divisions, there is a strategic avoidance from identifying as black. Ultimately, what is gained from Sue’s dissertation is an understanding that there are variances to mestizaje’s influence in a contemporary context, and the process of racial amalgamation can be strategically engaged. However, these variances do not diminish that at the core, mestizaje operates to discourage identification with black ancestry and impose racial homogeneity.

Christina Sue expands the discussion of race mixture and mestizaje in *Land of the Cosmic Race: Race Mixture, Racism, and Blackness in Mexico*. The objective of the study is to explore how Mexicans of primarily mixed European and indigenous ancestry in urban areas of Veracruz understand race and how this understanding relates to national racial ideology. To further this objective, she argues that the symbolization of mestizos as “quintessential Mexicanness… neglects the mestizo experience…treats mestizo as a monolithic category…and neglects
the issue of blackness". These arguments are supported through an analysis of race, color, ethnicity, ideology, and the reproduction of ideology, and, fills a gap in scholarship regarding the study of race and how it manifests in contemporary Mexico. Sue’s discussion of race and national ideology is imperative to understanding how Afro-descended Mexicans fit into the discourse of mestizaje in a historical as well as contemporary context. Land of the Cosmic Race leads the reader to conclude that blackness is not only ignored on a national and institutional level, but also on an individual level as people treat it as something shameful, unimportant, and thus, not to be discussed.

Additional examination of circumstances surrounding racial discourse in Mexico is presented in Chege Githiora’s Afro-Mexicans: Discourse of Race and Identity on the African Diaspora. This text explains the historical significance of Afro-descended people in Mexico and how this relates to contemporary society. The author discusses how the establishment of a socioeconomic hierarchy continues to impact how Afro-Mexicans currently identity themselves. The author includes information from interactions with residents in an Afro-Mexican


43 Christina A. Sue, Land of the Cosmic Race, 10.
community in Guerrero as evidence of the connection between historical conceptions of race and current racial identifications. Githiora argues that although mestizaje encouraged cultural and racial “whitening”, there are still communities of people with visible African ancestry who value their African heritage and self-identify as black. Pride in African heritage is represented in expressions that make a clear distinction between los negros and other groups, as well as the phrase “somos los negros de Guerrero” (we are the blacks of Guerrero).\(^{44}\) Unsurprisingly, blacks in these enclave communities remain at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy as peasant agriculturalists, fisherman, and farmers, an indication that blackness in Mexico continues to have limiting socioeconomic implications, and black people remain at the margins of society.\(^{45}\) Githoria’s conclusions are somewhat similar to Sue’s in that both authors agree that residents in Afro-Mexican communities see a direct correlation between self-identification, perceived identification, and poverty. Therefore, future investigations of Afro-Mexicans’ current social status must work toward dismantling the relationship


between black identity and inferior economic position to gain a better view of what blackness means to Afro-Mexicans.

To conclude the discussion of self-identity fashioning in scholarship related to Afro-Mexicans, Herman Bennett’s Colonial Blackness provides a comprehensive historical interpretation of blackness in Mexico. Bennett explores the relationship between the formation of cultures and identities to determine the meaning of blackness in early modern society. He discusses how black identity is represented and strategically embraced. Bennett emphasizes the importance of studying African populations outside of slavery considering in the New World these experiences were much larger. This creates space for an analysis of other concepts like family life, cultural practices, and methods of agency. Similar to other scholars on Afro-Mexico, Bennett engages questions dealing with African ethnicity, the existence of black communities, and the implications of blackness, considering that mestizaje encouraged physical and cultural mixing. The frequency in which mestizaje is employed as an analytical framework for interpreting the black experience further proves its primary role in subjugating Afro-descended people in Mexico.

46 Herman L. Bennett, Colonial Blackness. For extended discussion on identity self-fashioning, see Herman Bennett, Africans in Colonial Mexico.
While considerable research has been undertaken by U.S. academics, questions regarding the Afro-Mexican population are also an important area of interest for Mexican academics. Scholars such as Sagrario Cruz Carretero, María Eliza Velazquez, and Luz María Martínez Montiel have established research agendas over the last two decades that have influenced the trajectory of Afro-Mexican Studies. Cruz Carretero’s doctoral dissertation, “Identity in an Afro-Mexican Community in Central Veracruz” provides a historical and cultural analysis of identity formation and expression. The arguments that are presented are significant because of their emphasis on the development of regional culture and identity. The broad implications of Cruz Carretero’s work are also evident in Christina Sue’s research, which highlights similar topics and engages a regional analytical approach.

Research by María Elisa Velazquez has also contributed to furthering Afro-Mexicans’ visibility and influencing the direction of future investigations. Specifically, Women of African Origen in the Capital of New Spain engages analysis of enslaved black women’s labor, sexuality, social mobility, and marriage dynamics. These issues are central to understanding

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47 Sagrario Cruz Carretero del Carmen, “Identidad en una Comunidad Afromestiza del Centro de Veracruz; La Población de Mata Clara.” PhD diss., Universidad de las Américas-Puebla.
the diverse experiences of Afro-descended people as well as particular factors that influenced these experiences. Further elaboration on diversity within the Afro-descended population is provided in *Poblaciones y Culturas de Origen Africano en México*, in which Velazquez considers the heterogeneity of African cultures and examines multi-ethnic African groups. Velazquez also challenges the construction of race and ethnicity and how they have been applied in studies on the African population in Mexico.

Similar to Velazquez, Luz María Montiel re-establishes the third root in Mexico by analyzing the socioeconomic significance of the slave trade. *Afro América: La Ruta del Esclavo*, emphasizes Africans’ contributions in the development of labor, society, and culture throughout the Americas. Montiel’s diasporic approach in discussing these issues offers a broader perspective on how Mexico fits within the African Diaspora and promotes conversation about how the field can be expanded.

**Areas for Further Investigation**


50 Luz María Montiel, *Afro América I: La Ruta del Esclavo*. (Mexico City, MX: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2006).
The variety in research topics is now vast and continues to expand as more knowledge is gained with each investigation. New questions need answers. Vinson III identifies nineteenth and twentieth century Mexico as understudied topics in regard to the black population.\footnote{Ben Vinson III, “Black Mexico and the Historical Discipline”, 3.} I believe mobilization for black people’s political inclusion as a racially distinct group could use more attention. Vaughn includes some of this discussion in his dissertation, but an entire study dedicated to this topic is appropriate. The social construction of gender, beauty, and sexuality as it relates to Afro-Mexican women requires further investigation. Stepan, Marentes, and Miller mention that perpetuation of the nation’s image is inextricably linked to ideas of aesthetics, women’s reproduction, and gender normativity but no studies explore these ideas and their significance for black women. Scholarship on these topics that specifically relate to Mexico is limited, but conclusions can be drawn from literature addressing these issues in other Latin American countries.

Juliet Hooker’s article “Indigenous Inclusion/Black Exclusion” predicts difficulty for achieving the goal of black people’s political recognition as a separate ethnic group.\footnote{Ben Vinson III, “Black Mexico and the Historical Discipline”, 3.}
According to Hooker, the criterion for gaining collective rights in Latin America primarily centers on the existence of a distinct cultural group identity that is separate from the national culture.\textsuperscript{53} Thus, Indians have been more successful than Afro-Latinos in gaining multicultural citizenship as a result of how they have been racialized historically and in a contemporary setting.\textsuperscript{54} The inconsistency in granting collective rights to Indians and not Afro-Latinos is problematic considering that both groups encounter similar socioeconomic disparities due to racial discrimination. Although Hooker’s arguments are not specific to the Afro-Mexican case, her examination is useful to understand the process of multicultural citizenship in Latin America on a broader scale, and it can provide a framework for future investigations on this issue. More work is needed to uncover particular nuances related to mobilization for Afro-Mexicans’ political inclusion.

More research also needs to be devoted to the significance of gender construction for Afro-Mexican women. This intellectual gap is somewhat addressed by Maria Elena Martinez’ \textit{Geneological Fictions}, which discusses the connection between

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{53} Juliet Hooker, “Indigenous Inclusion/Black Exclusion”, 291.
  \item \textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
gender and the racial caste system in colonial Mexico.\textsuperscript{55} However, as indicated by Nancy Appelbaum uses “Racial Nations”, to analyze gender and sexuality in post-independent Latin America because these ideas have a central role in shaping racialized notions of national identity.\textsuperscript{56} Appelbaum, like Stepan, contends that the nation’s image was contingent on controlling women’s reproduction and sexual behavior. Appelbaum also introduces an additional aspect to consider, arguing that national identity imposed a hierarchy of power dynamics among men that positioned their status vis-à-vis their ability to protect women’s sexual virtue and control women’s labor.\textsuperscript{57} When this reality is analyzed with regard to Afro-Mexican women, it becomes apparent that the sober ramifications of mestizaje extend beyond race and affect Afro-Mexican women on multiple levels and manifestations. In the absence of a distinct history of racial as well as gender discourse, Afro-Mexican women are further marginalized from the dominant societal construction, circumstances that enable the dominant society to impose their

\textsuperscript{55} Maria Elena Martinez, Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).


\textsuperscript{57} Nancy Appelbaum, “Racial Nations”, 16.
interpretations of racial and national identity on Afro-Mexican women, while at the same time denying their presence.

Kia Lilly Caldwell’s *Negras in Brazil* contributes to the literature on black women’s experience in Latin America. She explores the ways in which the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality influence racial formations and political activism in contemporary Brazilian society, with relevant implications for understanding how race, gender, and national identity influence black women’s politics. Caldwell’s discussion goes beyond voting, mobilization, and other formal manifestations of citizenship by interrogating the political and social implications associated with Afro-Brazilian women. The historical portrayal of African and Afro-Brazilian women is central to Caldwell’s argument because it serves as an analytical framework for how Afro-Brazilian women are currently represented. It indicates how European hegemony has contributed to black women’s subjugation. More importantly, Caldwell examines the role of racial democracy in perpetuating oppressive attitudes toward Afro-Brazilian women despite the contention that it has eradicated racism in Brazil. Although she argues that racial and gender discrimination has adversely affected Afro-Brazilian women, Caldwell acknowledges that they assert their agency and have begun to transform racial formations and their implications. Overall, *Negras in Brazil* is a model of
important questions and concepts to engage for future investigations related to Afro-descended women’s political experience in other Latin American countries.

Another gap in literature examining the Afro-descendant community in Mexico is a comparative discussion that considers the impact of transnational experiences. While Laura A. Lewis’ Chocolate and Corn Flour includes a chapter that analyzes how Afro-descended Mexicans from San Nicolás, Guerrero navigate transnational meanings of race after migrating to North Carolina, a more thorough investigation has yet to be undertaken. An example of how such a study is relevant to the Afro-descended population in Latin America as well as the United States is Micol Seigel’s Uneven Encounters: Making Race and Nation in Brazil and the United States. This text explores the problematic issues of racial essentialism, and misconceptions of race and nation in the United States and Brazil. Seigel argues that there are more similarities in racial identity construction between the two countries than has been discussed in previous scholarship and suggests that attempts to portray the opposite are incorrect. Seigel further argues that because racial formations transcend national boundaries, our understanding of these formations must also be transnational. This point is instrumental in considering the broader implications of Afro-descended Mexicans’ lived experience and understanding of other
transnational spaces, how they are represented in a transnational context, and positioning them in the larger African Diaspora. Seigel’s approach in relaying the significance of transnational perspectives centers on the intersection of race, class, and empire through the framework of the coffee trade between the U.S. and Brazil. She uses racialized coffee advertisements to indicate that “consumer citizenship is a racialized nationalism constructed in transnational context”.

By engaging a comparative analysis of the Afro-descended Mexican population in this manner, more extensive questions regarding migration and socioeconomic and cultural exchange can be analyzed and contribute to the existing literature.

Conclusions

The continued expansion of Afro-Mexican studies has moved the intellectual conversation concerning Afro-Latinos beyond countries such as Brazil and Cuba, whose participation in the slave trade, and social conditions of the black population both post-independence and at present have been given extensive attention in academic research. This influx of publications on the Afro-Mexican population along with emphasis in the Blacks in Latin America documentary series is furthering the larger

project of making the black population in Mexico more visible. Scholars of Afro-Mexico must ensure that the intellectual dialogue continues to serve the field’s larger purpose of replanting Mexico’s third root.

This historiography of Afro-Mexican studies indicates that although the field has progressed significantly from Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán’s argument that African slavery existed in Mexico, the necessity for additional studies on the black population is never-ending. One reason is that the Afro-Mexican population continues to be ignored by the Mexican government and their historical legacy remains non-existent in narratives that are disseminated by the government through public education, politics, and media. Considering that this is the reality in which Afro-Mexicans live, it is even more pressing that scholars continue to be proactive in engaging these issues within their scholarship and disrupt dominant narratives that misrepresent past and present social conditions in Mexico.
CHAPTER 3
NATIONALIZING RACISM: GOVERNMENT SPONSORED MODERNIZATION THROUGH FORMAL AND SOCIAL EDUCATION IN OAXACA, 1920S-1930S

The Revolution (with a capital R) became the historical moment par excellence, ‘the midwife of history,’ and a new conception of the national identity was constructed around it, its heroes, and its plan for the future of the nation.

-Enrique Florescano, National Narratives in Mexico: A History, 2006

Historical Background

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 is widely regarded as the first social and political rebellion of the twentieth century. Revolutionary insurgents such as Pancho Villa, Emiliano Zapata, Francisco Madero, and others were intent on dismantling the Porfirian dictatorship (1876-1910) and implementing equitable social, economic, and political practices for all citizens regardless of racial, ethnic, or class differences. Along with revolutionary insurgents, the Revolution was carried out by the Mexican intelligentsia, tasked with constructing national identity, image, and memory on an educational and cultural level. One of the most influential intellectuals of this period is José Vasconcelos, whose 1926 publication La Raza Cósmica (The Cosmic Race) discusses racial construction in Latin America and its relationship to prospects for socioeconomic and political
Central to Vasoncelos’s notion of a cosmic race is the perception of racial mixture as an ideal method for nation building. He promotes hybridization as a “biological process of national formation, allowing the emergence of a national homogenous type through a process of racial fusion.”

Vasconcelos’s theory resonates because it endorses an ideology of mestizaje, viewed as a solution to socioeconomic and political challenges that existed in Latin America due to its racial and ethnic diversity. The objective of mestizaje is to “assimilate all the racial elements of the nation into a single cultural and biological norm”: the mestizo. Vasconcelos’s La Raza Cósmica is vital in validating this discourse and its benefit to Latin America.

Vasconcelos is also a prominent figure in Mexican history from his position as Secretary of Public Education from 1921–1924. The first person to hold this office, he constructed the framework for public education in Mexico and implemented programs that promoted literacy as a tool for modernization. Although La Raza Cósmica was published after Vasconcelos’s

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3 Nancy Leys Stepan, The Hour of Eugenics, 147.
tenure as Secretary of Public Education, *mestizaje* ideology directly correlated with the educational programs Vasconcelos created. In particular, a group of teachers called the *Misiones Culturales* (cultural missionaries) were organized by Vasconcelos and instructed to build schools in rural communities throughout Mexico in an effort to modernize sectors of the population that had been socially, economically, and politically marginalized by the government prior to the Revolution. These schools were heavily concentrated in indigenous communities that were isolated from the mainstream. *Mestizaje* is relevant to this endeavor in that the objective is not solely to provide people in indigenous communities with a formal education, but also to socialize and acculturate them to customs acceptable by those who represent the majority or mainstream population.

This chapter will focus on the activities of cultural missionaries in Oaxaca during the 1920s. While modernization efforts through social and formal education were predominantly implemented in indigenous communities located in the northern part of Oaxaca, I argue that observations from cultural missionaries related to social and educational conditions are indicative of a particular construction of Mexican identity that promotes *mestizaje*. The exclusion of *morenos* from this state sponsored initiative suggests that blackness along with
indigeneity is otherized, with the primary difference being that morenos lack visibility.\(^4\)

**Los Misiones Culturales: Who Were They and What Did They Do?**

According to Mexican anthropologist Manuel Gamio, a nation has distinct characteristics that unify all its citizens across socioeconomic boundaries. These characteristics are racial and ethnic similarity among the majority of citizens, use of a common language, common cultural customs, and a shared historical memory.\(^5\) Because indigenous people live in enclave communities and practice traditional indigenous customs, they represent a challenge to national unity. Intellectuals such as Gamio and Vasconcelos theorized on how to resolve “the Indian problem”. Vasconcelos’s solution is to create an educational program focused on the social and formal education of indigenous people living in rural areas of the country. Teachers who participate in this program are called *misiones culturales*, and are “expected to transform the mainly Indian population and


incorporate it into the national mainstream”. While building schools and providing instruction in reading, writing, and Spanish language is a significant aspect of the program, Vasconcelos includes components such as classes on nutrition, hygiene, and acceptable cultural practices that are reminiscent of Spanish missionary principles, which accepts “heathen” people in heaven only through instruction in living a proper religious life. Vasconcelos intends to replicate this notion socially and apply it to mestizaje ideology by acculturating indigenous people to mestizo norms through education.

From Vasconcelos’s perspective, creating missions would have social and economic benefits for indigenous communities, serving as “important economic spaces, fostering the development of local natural resources and combining academic education with technical and agricultural training”. In the state of Oaxaca, these efforts were concentrated in indigenous communities located in the northern part of the state. Local directors were responsible for bringing Vasconcelos’s vision to fruition and reiterated the role of the misiones culturales. A document written by the director of the misiones culturales in

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7 Luis A. Marentes, José Vasconcelos, 57.

8 Ibid, 128.
Yanhuitlan, Oaxaca on April 7, 1926 states that “to encourage the complete development of a school for children and the social improvement of the community, the commissioner of this organization proposes, and the secretary accepts, that a small cultural center for the home and school be installed in every zone.” This document represents a specific example of Vasconcelos’s idea that schools in rural indigenous communities should serve an educational as well as a social and cultural purpose. Vasconcelos believed it was critical to prepare children as well as adults in having an active role in the modern economic and political system. Another significant component of the cultural missionary program was that teachers’ responsibility extended “beyond the distribution and gathering of information” to include a social role in promoting “local, regional, and national cohesion”. Therefore, missionary schools were an essential tool in transmitting mestizaje ideology to citizens and crafting ideas concerning race, national identity, and patriotism.

The image of the new nation was crafted on racial amalgamation and socioeconomic prosperity, so Vasconcelos held

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9 Archivo de Concentración e Histórico de la Secretaria de Educación Pública, Dirección de Instituto Sociales, Primer Instituto Social en Yanhuitlan Oaxaca, folio 1 box 5/2, 1926.

10 Luis A. Marentes, *José Vasconcelos*, 129.
high expectations for teachers participating in the cultural missionary program. Teachers must “be completely vigilant in their own attitude” because “every one of their acts will have a string of heroic or fatal consequences for the life of the nation”. Thus Vasconcelos believed that the nation’s socioeconomic and political future hinged on the success of the program.

The government’s commitment to modernizing indigenous communities through education is also evident in a report signed by the head of the cultural missionaries in Yanhuitlan, Oaxaca, which states, “this report sincerely believes that the introduction of modern systems of teaching needs to be addressed and for that reason insisted as it was possible to leave a base in which they may start to dominate in all the approaches to the project –geometry, arithmetic, and language”. This indicates that it was intended for indigenous people to be visible in the making of modern Mexico and acquire technical and educational skill necessary to be competitive in the growing economy. However, in addition to receiving a formal education, Vasconcelos believed that indigenous people needed to be acclimated to mainstream cultural mores.

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11 Primer Instituto Sociál en Yanhuitlan Oaxaca, folio 84 box 5/2, 1926.
12 Primer Instituto Sociál en Yanhuitlan Oaxaca, folio 84 box 5/2, 1926.
To further achieve Vasconcelos’s goal of cultural amalgamation, the misiones culturales recorded observations on dietary habits and production routines of local people as well as the economic infrastructure of towns in which they worked. A dietary questionnaire completed on June 2, 1926 by a missionary in Yanhuitlan indicates that because few families have cows, they are not accustomed to cow’s milk and thus get milk from goats, which do not have all the nutritious elements as milk that comes from cows.\textsuperscript{13} Similar observations are documented by other missionaries, which suggest that part of the cultural amalgamation process was to transition indigenous people from their traditional dietary habits to those associated with modernity and upward mobility. Advocating for indigenous peoples’ cultural conversion is a common objective throughout documents from the misiones culturales. Further evidence is in missionaries’ observations related to production routines and several characterizations of the environment in which they work as agricultural, specializing in the cultivation of crops like corn, sugar cane, coffee, and fruit.\textsuperscript{14} The purpose of recording what crops are produced and how they are cultivated is to identify more efficient methods that will increase production.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid, folio 72.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid, folio 34 and 79.
As will be discussed in detail later in the paper, information that was collected by the misiones culturales further establishes the correlation between mestizaje and national projects promoting modernity.

**Promoting Modernity, or Institutionalizing Discrimination?**

On a basic level, Vasconcelos’s educational project for marginalized communities is innovative in recognizing the government’s social responsibility to provide all its citizens with access to public education. However, considering that mestizaje ideology influenced Vasconcelos’s vision, the goals of the cultural missionary program are problematic because they promote racial and ethnic discrimination toward people considered to be outside of the mestizo cultural norm. In addition to mestizaje, revolutionary indigenismo became a prevalent philosophy that influenced public perception concerning race, ethnicity, and social status. Revolutionary indigenismo endorses a paternalistic view toward indigenous people that embraces the symbolic significance of their culture but does not acknowledge them as part of mainstream culture. According to historian Alan Knight, revolutionary indigenismo “involved the imposition of ideas, categories, and policies from the outside. Indians themselves were the objects, not the
It was common practice for those included in the mestizo majority to discuss the socioeconomic status of indigenous people. This philosophy is subscribed to by Manuel Gamio, who writes, “One is surprised by the Indians’ vitality as much as by their vigorous physical nature. Their physiology is intriguing, since we find very few countries in which the human body is so productive in spite of a lack of nutrition”. Gamio also argued that Indians are a “poor and pained race that will not awaken without friendly hearts to work for their redemption”. Although mestizaje is more relevant to Vasconcelos’s educational projects, his belief that indigenous people needed civilizing is similar to the paternalism associated with revolutionary indigenismo and is another manifestation of nationalist attempts to solve the “Indian problem”.

Cultural missionaries’ observations of people in communities in which they worked were also colored by prevailing attitudes toward race and ethnicity. In a telegram that was received by the director of the misiones culturales on May 22, 1911.


16 Manuel Gamio, Forjando Patria, 36.

17 Ibid, 37.
1926, a missionary in Yanhuitlan writes, “The Mixtec race demonstrates a superior capacity for adaption to knowledge. Intellectual development is achieved through work, education, and general rules of character building”.\textsuperscript{18} This observation is indicative of paternalistic ideals related to \textit{mestizaje} and revolutionary \textit{indigenismo} in that it suggests that what Indians do not have biologically due to their race and social status can be achieved through the redemptive efforts of others working on their behalf. It also implies that Indians’ ability to achieve these characteristics is contingent on them subscribing to cultural practices that are socially acceptable by the dominant \textit{mestizo} culture.

Vasconcelos’s cultural missionary program poses specific challenges to the inclusion of indigenous people and others labeled as outside of the cultural and social mainstream into the modern, industrial society that emerged after the revolution. Because racial and cultural amalgamation is a fundamental aspect of \textit{mestizaje} ideology, Indians were admitted into the new nation “as long as they adapted to modernity and adapted to rationalism and materialism of the Mexican state; it denied them as long as they clung to their traditional

\textsuperscript{18} Primer Instituto Sociál en Yanhuitlan Oaxaca, folio 54 box 5/2, 1926.
What Vaconcelos visualized as reforming and developing the nation was actually creating an imposed notion of an ideal citizen and institutionalizing racism and discrimination toward non-mestizo people.

Creating an Ideal Citizen: The Mestizo

While racism and discrimination are not explicit in the objectives of the cultural missionary project, their alignment with mestizaje social and cultural ideals, as well as Vasconcelos’s interest in eugenics, reveal an intention to promote the concept of an “ideal Mexican” that does not consider the significance of racial, ethnic, or class divisions. According to Marilyn Grace Miller, nationalist projects employing mestizaje rhetoric resulted in an “erosion of ‘regions of refuge’ such as autonomous indigenous communities, whether geographic or linguistic, and the romanticization or folklorization of the Indian and the black, thereby dismissing their active engagement with contemporary political practices”.

Therefore Vasconcelos’s concern for the education of indigenous communities was not genuine, but rather an attempt to create separation from the images they represented: backwardness,

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19 Stepan, The Hour of Eugenics, 150.

20 Marilyn Grace Miller, Rise and Fall of the Cosmic Race: The Cult of Mestizaje in Latin America (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2004), 4.
poverty, ignorance, and heathenism. None of these attributes fit within the conception of modern Mexico and are the antithesis of qualities required of the ideal, mestizo Mexican: education, refinement, industriousness, and civility. Furthermore, indigenous communities were a reminder of the social and cultural evolutionary process beyond which the mestizo majority had elevated themselves.

Miller also argues that mestizaje fails to acknowledge “the everyday experience of nonwhite or nonurban communities that did not share the values and goals of the mestizo majority”. While the process of mestizaje did not erase indigenous people from national memory, it did relegate them to an association purely with the pre-Hispanic past and deny their contributions to the development of modern society. Consequently, the mestizo becomes synonymous with modernity and progress, and indigenous people, although they have visibility, are disempowered. This relates to the cultural missionary project in that it represented the departure from traditional indigenous cultural practices as social and economic progression for the benefit of people in those communities as well as the entire nation. Additionally, missionary schools were the primary vehicle through which the message of racial and cultural amalgamation

21 Ibid.
was promoted to indigenous people. Overall, the imposition of cultural norms associated with the mestizo class on indigenous communities indicates an effort on behalf of Vasconcelos to create opportunities for the legal exclusion of non-mestizo people in receiving the same benefits as the mestizo majority.

Vasconcelos’s interest in eugenics is relevant in his endeavor to implement policies that promote the notion of an ideal citizen. Eugenics explicitly connects national identity with race and reproduction by defining a nation as having “a common purpose, a shared language and culture, and a homogenous population” and emphasizing the sustainability of national purity through maintaining sexual boundaries between races. Eurocentric values are at the core of eugenics, with European ancestry being the ideal and other races possessing degenerate qualities, making racial mixing oppositional to national cohesion. These perceptions were “validated” through science and impacted socioeconomic and political policies toward “racial others”. Vasconcelos, along with other Latin American eugenists, endorsed the concept of racial purity, but instead of accepting Eurocentric values “praised racial hybridization as itself a form of eugenization that would help consolidate the

nation around the mestizo”. Therefore Mexico becomes defined by its mestizo identity and individuals who are outside of this construction due to racial or cultural variances are marginalized or have no visibility, a problem when the distribution of socioeconomic resources and services is considered.

If indigenous people remain in enclave communities and continue their traditional cultural practices, based on mestizaje ideology, they are not considered a part of the cultural norm and thus should not have access to rights and privileges associated with the mestizo class. In regard to morenos, racial and social consolidation around mestizo identity not only resulted in their marginalization, but a complete denial of their existence. Although the revolution was intended to promote social, economic, and political equality for all people regardless of racial or class background, Vasconcelos’s cultural missionary program and the ideology that influenced its creation reveal a continuation of oppressive policies that had previously been associated with the Porfirian dictatorship.

The concept of an ideal citizen is further problematized when analyzed in relation to the developing industrial economy.

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23 Ibid, 106.
Because *mestizo* is a racial as well as societal category, identification with the *mestizo* class implies a specific socioeconomic status. Although Vasconcelos’s mission was to transform the nation and engender unity and patriotism through the cultural missionary program, the project actually endorsed a capitalist system that created particular roles based on racial and social classification. As argued by Luis A. Marentes, missionary schools were designed to “prepare a disciplined labor force with a work ethic more conducive to their exploitation”\(^\text{24}\). Since the locations of missionary schools were concentrated in rural indigenous communities, race and social status become significant factors in the economic system. This relationship labels individuals outside of the *mestizo* mainstream as laborers or producers of materials rather than owners, which is reserved for those within the majority. This relationship is presented as the natural social order because the progress of the nation is centered on racial amalgamation and identification with the *mestizo* category.

Documents from the *misiones culturales* in Yanhuitlán, Oaxaca contain an explicit example giving credence to Marentes’s argument that missionary schools served as mechanisms to train a labor force for the development of a capitalist economy. The

\(^\text{24}\) Luis A. Marentes, *Jose Vasconcelos*, 57.
head of the cultural missionaries remarked, "Every time [indigenous communities] were taught a better way of production, they were also told where to find good markets, insisting the necessity to seek foreign markets, especially informing them of the demand in the United States for our hats, our shoes, colored mats, baskets, etc". Indigenous people were viewed in the modern economy as cheap labor for the foreign consumption of domestic products. The director’s acknowledgement that indigenous people were to occupy a menial position in the economy also raises questions concerning the legitimacy of the cultural missionary project’s objectives as outlined by Vasconcelos. Clearly, no genuine intention of incorporating indigenous people into the social and cultural mainstream existed. Observations and reports from the misiones culturales demonstrated that Vasconcelos’s missionary project was designed to perpetuate and legitimize the social, economic, and political marginalization of racial “others”.

Given the overarching goals of the missionary program, further exploitation of racial “others” may not have been intended; however, recognition of the program’s negative social and cultural implications through its promotion of modernity as defined by Eurocentric standards is imperative. One social

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Primer Instituto Sociál en Yanhuitlan Oaxaca, folio 91 box 5/2, 1926.
worker laments the situation in a letter written on October 15, 1926:

I think it is a big mistake and hurtful to the national psyche to separate people into categories based on cultural backwardness as gente de razón or Indian. We are all Mexicans. More than three-quarters of us come from races that were born from these lands at the beginning of time. Less than one-fourth comes from the European man transplanted here to the “New World” and mixed with the native races. This is small, but serves as a powerful vehicle for the infusion of business and science of European civilization that has existed for four centuries and will be an immense factor in Mexico’s destiny. However, this element has never been nor is able to form the soul, the spirit, of Mexico.

Although the social worker expresses cultural sensitivity and a strong commitment to promoting understanding between the mainstream population and indigenous people, references to Europe and its social, cultural, and biological mixing with indigenous Mexican culture ultimately endorses mestizaje ideology in that it romanticizes the Spanish Conquest and claims a symbolic attachment to indigenous culture. The soul and spirit of Mexico is attributed to indigenous influence whereas intellectual aptitude is credited to European culture. This

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26 This term derives from the colonial period and refers to people who are culturally Hispanic. Indigenous people who wore traditional clothing, lived in enclave communities, and maintained their cultural traditions, along with blacks (slave and free) and other black and indigenous mixtures were not considered gente de razón. For more information see Ana María Alonso, Thread of Blood: Colonialism, Revolution and Gender on Mexico's Northern Frontier (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1995), Cope, The Limits of Racial Domination, Ilona Katzew, Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).

27 Primer Instituto Sociál en Yanhuitlan Oaxaca, folio 88 box 5/4, 1926.
perception validates mestizo discourse, which argues for the selective infusion of the two cultures. The implementation of the cultural missionary program reinforced these values and allowed their transmission to the socioeconomically marginalized.

While the project’s impact on indigenous communities is well documented, what is missing from the discussion is its impact on Mexicans of African descent. Throughout Vasconcelos’s discourse of racial amalgamation to instill national unity and stimulate social and economic modernization, there is no mention how Afro-descended Mexicans, or morenos, factor into this equation. The exclusion of morenos from the cultural missionary program was intentional and further established the dominance of the mestizo majority and the inferiority of racial others. Their exclusion also highlights an additional layer of marginalization non-existent for indigenous people: invisibility from the historical and contemporary national discourse.

Writing Morenos Out of the National Discourse

The motives for the creation of the cultural missionary program were not all positive, but the exclusion of morenos means the government provided no resources for the development of education and training in technical skills for people in these communities. Denied these advantages, morenos had more
difficulty competing in a new economic system without necessary education and training, therefore relegating them to a lower economic status. While indigenous communities that participated in the project were ultimately exploited, the lack of educational and industrial presence in moreno communities promoted illiteracy, poverty, and backwardness to be associated with moreno identity. Vasconcelos’s failure to include Afro-descended Mexicans in his vision of a modern, educated citizenry provided government endorsement of their marginalization and simultaneously denied their existence. Their exclusion suggests that while indigenous people could be amalgamated into the mestizo category on the condition that they subscribed to mestizo social and cultural mores, amalgamation for Afro-descended Mexicans was not possible under any circumstances. Racialization, exclusion, and their negative consequences meet Timothy J. Stanley’s criteria for historic racisms.28 As will be indicated in later chapters, the failure to include Afro-descended communities in the missionary program and the failure to institutionally recognize the existence and value of their culture had visible impacts for towns such as Morelos, Oaxaca; therefore, historic racisms had a central role in determining

the excluded populations’ overall quality of life. This point raises larger questions concerning the relationship between national identity construction and citizenship.

Étienne Balibar posits that “the specific articulation of racism is within nationalism [which is] paradoxically present in racism itself.”29 Thus the idea of a national project that unifies citizens by engendering pride and loyalty to the nation through the dissemination of a particular message or belief system is inherently racist. The missionary program transmitted this message to indigenous communities through social and formal education with the intention of erasing racial and socioeconomic obstacles that contributed to their marginalization. Despite the objective for all citizens to coalesce as one people, the missionary program’s underlying message is clear: the government is putting some investment into racially otherized communities to further their goal of national unification by providing an outlet through which they can shape racial and national identity construction. Since blackness was viewed as an obstacle to this process, Afro-descended communities were forgotten and pushed further to the fringes of society.

The exclusion of morenos from national projects and incorporation into modern society created an explicit distinction between the social and political implications of ascribed Mexican identity and perceived foreignness. Sociologist Christina Sue says this result aligns with the three ideological pillars of post-revolutionary national ideology: mestizaje, non-racism, and non-blackness. Mestizaje promotes social, cultural, and biological amalgamation into the mestizo category. Non-racism argues that racial discrimination does not exist, while non-blackness is the “marginalization, neglect, or negation of Mexico’s African heritage”. These arguments reinforce the influence of mestizaje and enable government officials and intellectuals to question the necessity of documenting race in the national census considering that racial discrimination cannot be present in a society in which all people are racially mixed. Consequently, race was discarded from the census after 1921. By discontinuing to document race in the census, the government sends an unambiguous message to its citizens as well as the global community that “being Mexican signifie[s] not engaging racism and living in a country where


31 Christina A. Sue, Land of the Cosmic Race, 15.
racism [does] not exist”. 32 Non-racism as a central component of the post-revolutionary national agenda assists in the socioeconomic marginalization of Afro-descended Mexicans and provides insight as to why they were excluded from national projects such as the cultural missionary program.

The third ideological pillar of post-revolutionary ideology, non-blackness, indicates that a singular, cohesive, national identity is only constructed through the erasure of blackness and an insistence that it is not native to Mexico. Sue contends that “Mexican leaders reclaimed the country’s indigenous past as part of nation-building efforts but largely ignored blacks in these new narratives”. 33 The inclusion of indigenous people and the exclusion of Afro-descendants present a barrier to national cohesion, and further solidify the message that blackness is not within the national framework. Sue argues that “at best, blackness has been treated as an element of Mexico’s population on a trajectory toward disappearance or as a regional issue but not constituting a ‘national problem’”. 34 Proof of this contention is evident in Vasconcellos’s assertion that “We have very few Blacks, and a large part of them is already becoming a

32 Ibid, 16.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid, 17.
mulatto population. The Indian is a good bridge for racial mixing“. The reference to blacks as a population on the verge of disappearing and Indians as a metaphorical bridge to merging racial and cultural differences highlights a clear distinction between the socioeconomic and political capital of being black or indigenous versus mestizo. When these ideological perspectives are analyzed in relation to the cultural missionary program, they collectively explain how and why blackness was erased from national memory and disregarded citizens who ethnically identified as such. Ultimately, the erasure of blackness robbed a particular group of citizens of their voice in society.

Further indication of the government’s disregard for blackness is evidenced in Vasconcelos’s idea of a cosmic race, which views races outside of the mestizo category as obstacles to ethnic unification, thereby otherizing morenos and labeling them as outsiders in their country of birth. According to twentieth century racial construction, blackness was considered “prejudicial to Mexico because [it] complicates rather than improve the ethnic problem“. Also, considering that fostering patriotism and nationalist sentiment was one of the goals of the

35 José Vasconcelos, La Raza Cósmica, 26.
36 Nancy Leys Stepan, The Hour of Eugenics, 152.
missionary program, the absence of *morenos* and Vasconcelos’s attitude toward racial others implies that *morenos* disrupt these efforts, an exemplifying view of sentiments towards Afro-descended people from Mexico. The construction of national identity and citizenship as described by Vasconcelos assumes *morenos* are not a part of the racial amalgamation process, and so not legitimate citizens of Mexico, not patriotic, and not contributing to the nation’s progress. Because *morenos* are Afro-descendants, they harken Mexico’s pre-Independent past, defined by slavery and a racial caste system implemented by the Spanish. The colonial period (1521-1810) symbolizes social and economic inequality and a lack of national unity; revolutionary ideology deems them barriers to social progression. As a result, the presence of Afro-descended people becomes associated with the legacy of the colonial era, a past that the nation has overcome.

Not only do *morenos* represent a challenge to national unification, their identity, culture, and existence has no value and can thus be erased from the national historical narrative. The government’s unwillingness to invest resources into improving *moreno* communities validates their marginalization and facilitates separation between them and the rest of the population. If the national government does not value or
acknowledge the presence of *morenos*, why should anyone else? Why would people outside of *moreno* communities be aware of their existence if they have no historical or contemporary significance in the national culture? As secretary of public education, José Vasconcelos knew that the way he developed the public education system and implemented its policies would determine the quality of life for individual citizens as well as the nation.

Because his cultural missionary project linked *mestizaje* ideology with formal education, it altered the way people viewed themselves, as a part of a nation of *mestizos*. Despite its subversive elements, the *mestizo* category allows for the existence of an indigenous presence through its acknowledgement that the *mestizo* came from the fusion of Spanish and indigenous ancestry. Since the same privilege is not granted to *morenos*, they have no lens through which to view themselves in relationship to the national culture. Consequently, the perpetuation of *mestizaje* through the missionary project institutionalized discrimination toward *morenos* because it devalued Afro-descended people and wrote them out of national discourse.

While the missionary program was influential in disseminating social and educational ideals to promote modernity among the
indigenous population, it is inaccurate to assume that every action taken by the cultural missionaries was aligned with the views of José Vasconcelos simply because he was the program’s creator. As argued by Luis A. Marentes, “Vasconcelos’s personal project was challenged and transformed at a multiplicity of levels, and it is therefore quite problematic to adjudicate everything that the ministry did to the coherent will of its official head.”

This does not diminish the socioeconomic, political, and racial dilemmas inherent in Vasconcelos’s ideology nor its influence in the development of educational programs during his tenure as Secretary of Public Education. Both Vasconcelos and the cultural missionary program represent a moment in Mexican history in which national leaders reflected on the country’s progress and grappled with how to engender unity and patriotism after a thirty year dictatorship that ended in a brutal war and divided the nation.

**What does this mean for Morelos, Oaxaca?**

The exclusion of people in Morelos from the cultural missionary program and the government’s decision to stop documenting race after the 1921 census created a formula for perpetual socioeconomic inequality, discrimination, and

37 Luis A. Marentes, *José Vasconcelos*, 143.
invisibility. As a result, the community is forced to resolve the grave social problems of illiteracy, alcoholism, and teen pregnancy without government support. The following chapters will discuss this community as well as morenos in general. They continue to be ignored by the government, are not recognized in the national census, and receive few socioeconomic resources. Their struggle is inextricably linked to the historical legacy of mestizaje and insistence that blackness and racism are foreign to Mexico. Although cultural missionary schools no longer exist, the symbolic meaning behind their establishment continues to shape contemporary racial construction and furthers the belief that Mexico is a nation of mestizos. Consequently, Afro-descended Mexicans’ citizenship and value to the nation is still contested outside of moreno communities. Because blackness is not institutionally acknowledged, Afro-descended Mexicans’ fight for equality is doubly hard: they must fight for national recognition, (i.e. a racial or ethnic category in the census), as well as socioeconomic opportunities.

Conclusions

The success of the Mexican Revolution stimulated vast social, economic, and political change with promising potential to unify and modernize the nation. With the creation of the Office of Secretary of Public Education, the government expressed a
commitment to ensure that all its citizens received a primary and secondary education to increase the nation’s social and economic progress. Considering that José Vasconcelos led the structuring of public education in Mexico, it is fair to conclude his projects had significant influence in improving the quality of life for people during the 1920’s and beyond. The cultural missionary program was a defining feature of Vasconcelos’s tenure as secretary of public education, and on one level, it represents an acknowledgement that the indigenous population had previously been alienated from the larger population due to their race and cultural practices. Despite the concern to correct historical inequities through formal education, the missionary program’s social and cultural education element overshadows its positive characteristics. Due to the influence of mestizaje, Vasconcelos’s motivations for including indigenous communities in the project are not altruistic and seek to further the process of racial and cultural amalgamation. The implementation of the missionary project signifies an attempt to culturally assimilate indigenous people to transform Mexico into a mestizo nation and in turn, facilitate national unity around a single racial identity.

While Vasconcelos’s intentions for promoting public education in indigenous communities are not pure, his recognition of their
existence and need for education indicates that they had a place in the making of the new nation. Morenos did not. The absence of moreno representation in the cultural missionary documents speaks to the institutionalization of their invisibility, and results in their marginalization. Although indigenous identity and culture is still inferior to mestizo identity, the absence of moreno presence in the missionary program affirms that blackness is oppositional to nation building and not valued. The historical inequities in regard to the position of moreno identity in national discourse produce larger questions. What impact does a lack of government interest in developing a certain population’s communities have on that population in a contemporary context? Answering this question requires further investigation of the socioeconomic status of morenos living in enclave communities and its relationship to perceptions of national and racial identity.
CHAPTER 4  
**SOMOS DE MORELOS: RACE, PLACE AND CLAIMS TO NATIONAL IDENTITY IN MORELOS, OAXACA**

“What are we going to do, we can’t wash our color.”

—Armando Lopez, Farmer, Morelos, Oaxaca, 2013

**Introduction**

The region known as the Costa Chica, lies along the Pacific Coast of Oaxaca and Guerrero, and is home to the largest concentration of Afro-descended people in Mexico. Oaxaca, in particular, is especially unique because of its ethnically and culturally diverse population, with fifteen ethnic groups represented in the state.¹ According to the state government, an ethnic group is defined as “a community of people that identify with speaking the same language and share a common territory.”² Although ethnic and cultural diversity is celebrated and Afro-descended Mexicans are acknowledged within that mosaic, they have no formal recognition as an ethnic group because they do not speak a language other than Spanish. The consequences of

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² Ibid.
not having formal recognition have far-reaching impacts on their living conditions and their overall quality of life.

This chapter argues that people in Morelos have limited access to socioeconomic resources due to their location and identification as black. The absence of a "black" racial category in the national census poses challenges to government recognition and support of social problems. This influences political mobilization to work toward improving conditions. Qualitative research such as interviews and participant observation are the framework for the paper’s research methods. Field work was completed in the summer 2012 and 2013. People are aware that identity politics translate into access to resources. Some participants expressed the opinion that the government does not care about them because they are black. Education, poverty, and teen pregnancy were mentioned as factors that adversely impact development. Town history is not documented and oral tradition is disappearing because elders are dying and young people are not interested in sustaining traditions. This chapter examines Afro-Mexicans’ struggle for socioeconomic and political inclusion and the impacts of race on individuals' constructions of national identity and citizenship.
“Se Llamaba Poza Verde”: Historical Background on José María Morelos

Situating the town in the larger history of Mexico is necessary to understand the present socioeconomic conditions in Morelos. The town elders say the history of Morelos is oral, with stories passed on to younger generations. While it is common knowledge that Morelos was established by escaped slaves in the seventeenth century, this information is not documented, and few people can speak about it in detail. Accessing completely oral history is difficult because some of the people identified as having this knowledge were either deceased or denied knowing about Morelos’ history, saying “I don’t know the history. All I know is the town was only woods and ponds.” Initially, I thought it strange because I approached elders who were widely recommended as those with information about Morelos. It is possible that some people did not want to be recorded, or were not comfortable speaking with a foreigner. This could have been a considerable challenge with no information available in archives, but certain elders were willing to participate. Their stories, both personal and historical, provide valuable insight for understanding Morelos’ historical legacy, and they challenge dominant national discourses that represent Mexico as a mestizo nation.
The historical foundation of Morelos as a community of cimmarones, or escaped slaves, is firmly rooted in the town’s oral history and a source of pride for people who impart these memories. Juan Torres, a 72 year-old farmer is one of the elders considered valuable in preserving local history in Morelos. When I asked him to discuss how Morelos was established, he replied, “Yes the first people here were slaves. I was told at eleven or twelve years-old that slaves left the plantations and came here. The slaves won freedom using machetes, but here they weren’t slaves. I didn’t see this, but I was told. They cut sugar cane and bananas using machetes.”

Mr. Torres’s explanation is the most detailed information that anyone could provide regarding the town’s historical foundations. I attempted to search for archival documents in the local municipal agency that discussed this subject, but was informed that no such records exist in the agency or otherwise.

This is problematic considering that as seen in chapter three, teachers who participated in the Cultural Missionary Program during the 1920s and 1930s recorded demographic, historical, and cultural data about the primarily indigenous towns in which they worked. While the program promoted socializing indigenous communities to become more acculturated

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3 Juan Torres (farmer) in discussion with the author, June 30, 2013
with customs and ideals that were socially acceptable to the dominant culture, it did endorse initiatives to combat illiteracy, substance abuse, and public health issues. While these issues still persist in indigenous communities, there is an established historical and continued record of federal assistance to solve these social concerns. Afro-descended people are denied the same opportunities because “unlike Indianness and whiteness, blackness has no symbolic or capital value in Mexico.” Furthermore, having no official record of how Morelos was established reinforces the invisibility and marginalization of its residents as well as Afro-descended people in general.

Additionally, the municipal agency had no historical records to provide indication of daily life in Morelos. I asked Mr. Torres to offer his personal experience growing up in Morelos to convey how the town has evolved in some aspects and remained stagnant in others:

When I was five years-old I became aware of what it was like here. The town was called Poza Verde because there were many ponds. There weren’t big houses; I saw simple homes made of adobe. The town began growing and there were 100 people living here in 1949. There were no cars, only horses and donkeys. There wasn’t electricity when I was born so we used oil for light. There wasn’t electricity until 1969, but then we had to pay 10 pesos to the government for electricity. As I grew, when I was nine or

ten years-old, I began working with wood, using only an axe or machete, unlike now. I didn’t attend school and only one of my siblings knew how to read. We suffered a lot because we didn’t have many clothes. My mother would iron clothes Saturdays and Sundays and I had to be careful with my clothes when I worked because we only had three changes of clothes: one for work, one for play, and one for dress, so we would bathe and wear the same clothes.⁵

Access to socioeconomic resources in Morelos was limited and created financial hardships that required Mr. Torress and his siblings to work rather than attend school. For the most part residents continue to live in poverty, with the exception of some modern conveniences such as electricity and vehicles. Education, food availability, and financial sustainability are significant factors in determining overall quality of life, and each of these is directly influenced by Afro-descended people’s lack of recognition by the federal government.

In addition to the legacy of Morelos as a community of escaped slaves, the town’s participation in the Mexican Revolution is also undocumented and unknown to the larger population as well as younger generations in Morelos. Mr. Torres remembers, “During the revolution, people were suffering in the woods because the Carrancistas had guns. People had to plant maize in the woods because the Carrancistas were looking for people to kill. My dad told me they covered themselves with

⁵ Juan Torres (farmer) in discussion with the author, June 30, 2013.
blankets and old cloths in the woods and they were going to build another town one kilometer away, but there wasn’t water in the area, so they returned to Poza Verde.”

This information is important because as seen in chapter two, popular narratives of the Mexican Revolution highlight this period as a conflict between the landed criollo class and landless mestizo and indigenous classes that fought for civil rights and agrarian reform. A dialogue about Afro-descended people and how they were impacted by the revolution is not included in this narrative.

Further explanation about Morelos’ role in the revolution is given by Carlos Vasquez, a 50 year-old farmer whose father told him stories about the revolution. Mr. Vasquez is an advocate for farmers’ rights and known locally as an oral storyteller of this period in particular. In speaking about Morelos’ participation in the revolution, Mr. Vasquez stated:

Many people don’t know the history of Morelos during the revolution because they don’t want to learn from elders. Before the revolution, people planted maize and cotton for a plantation owner named Damato Gomez who came here from Corralero. People didn’t want to work for the plantation owner anymore, so they fought for communal land here, in Jamiltepec, and in Huazolochitlan. There was approximately 5,500 acres of land. People suffered a lot because there wasn’t much money from harvesting. They sold crops and had

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6 Ibid.

to give the money to the plantation owner, so they couldn’t save money. Many people were exploited. After they paid the plantation owner, they couldn’t provide for their household. There wasn’t much to eat. People here fought in the revolution to gain land rights because working for plantation owners was another form of slavery. They paid taxes to the plantation owner, not the government. This is why the revolution was important here. There was supposed to be communal land after the revolution, but banks only gave loans to rich people. Morelos participated in the revolution but there’s still discrimination. They say people in Morelos, Jamiltepec, Collantes, all the black towns are bad, but it’s not true. Many people discriminate against blacks and say being black is bad, but I’m proud to be black.

Enrique Florescano argues that the erasure of Afro-descended people from the historical legacy of the Revolution is significant because, “the Revolution (with a capital R) became the historical moment par excellence, ‘the midwife of history,’ and a new conception of the national identity was constructed around it, its heroes, and its plan for the future of the nation.” Afro-descended people’s absence from this narrative allows their citizenship and civil rights to be easily contested and reinforces the misconception that blackness is not indigenous to Mexico. Morelos’ participation in the Revolution as well as its legacy as a maroon community demonstrates an established tradition of fighting to liberate oneself from

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8 Carlos Vasquez (farmer) in discussion with the author, July 2, 2013.

9 Enrique Florescano, National Narratives in Mexico (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2006), xiii.
oppression that is inextricably linked to racial and class status. This tradition translates to the broader discourse of Afro-descended people’s role in the Revolution and offers an explanation for why it is not recognized in national narratives.

Additional insight regarding Morelos’s involvement in the Revolution and how it is perceived by younger generations in particular and the larger society in general is offered by a 70 year-old farmer named Armando Lopez. Concurring with Mr. Vasquez, Mr. Lopez confirmed that “Many people don’t know about the history of Morelos during the revolution because their parents don’t tell them or they don’t want to know. There are no books with the history because the history ended with the war.”

Similarly, along with a general de-emphasis of blackness in Mexican culture, Christina Sue’s analysis contends that “in many cases, individuals appeared to lack concrete information about the African side of their heritage, most likely because these lineages, like indigenous roots, are oftentimes marginalized or neglected in family discussion of ancestry.”

While younger generations in Morelos are aware of their Afro-descended heritage, their lack of interest in learning about themselves is equally as damaging to continuing the legacy of

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10 Armando Lopez (farmer) in discussion with the author, July 2, 2013.

oral tradition as not identifying at all. The sentiment that Morelos’s legacy has been forgotten or is not embraced by locals, particularly young people, is an indicator of the extent to which Afro-descended people’s influence in fashioning Mexican history and culture has been erased from the national image. As it stands, the only available means of exposure to learning about Afro-descended history is through elders, whereas the mainstream traditional history of the Revolution venerates the accomplishments of mestizos.\(^1\) The absence of Afro-descended Mexicans in historical literature, monuments, and overall culture continues to adversely affect Afro-descended people’s claims to citizenship, civil rights, and willingness to self-identify as black.

Mr. Lopez also confirmed people’s motivations for participating in the war and how the town was impacted during the war and after ended:

The president didn’t want to give rights to the farmers during the revolution and Zapata wanted all the farmers to be free. The people here fought with Zapata because he wanted to give farmers rights. My father told me about the history of the revolution. He was eleven years-old and left to the woods when the fighting began. My father was born here and left the woods to build a house. People left the woods when the fighting stopped. The economy wasn’t

better for farmers after the revolution because they only gained fifty cents a day. The people were still poor.  

Mr. Vasquez and Mr. Lopez’s perspective of the war are further proof of the disconnection between how the Revolution played out in Morelos and how it is illustrated on a larger scale as a source of national pride. The national discourse does not acknowledge that poverty, exploitation, and inequality continued to exist for indigenous or Afro-descended people. However, indigenous people are visible in the national memory of the Revolution, whereas Afro-descended people’s legacy has been forgotten. An explanation for why the success of the Revolution did not improve the economy in Morelos is that it “ensured land was distributed to the people, but did not create programs to support traditional production methods that would increase the potential of development in the region.”

The failure to memorialize Afro-descended Mexicans’ participation in the revolutionary war contributes to their socioeconomic and geographic isolation from mainstream society. Furthermore, the lack of historical recognition has translated to non-recognition in the present, leaving Afro-descended people in general and

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13 Armando Lopez (farmer) in discussion with the author, July 2, 2013.

those living in Morelos in particular with few resources to sustain themselves, their families, and their community.

**In the Field: Challenges and Teachable Moments**

In *Works and Lives: the Anthropologist as Author*, Clifford Geertz argues that what anthropologists write “is a result of their having actually penetrated (or...been penetrated by) another form of life, of having, one way or another, truly ‘been there’”. He further argues that anthropologists “need to convince us...that had we been there we should have seen what they saw, felt what they felt, concluded what they concluded”.

This approach toward field work echoes John Van Maanen’s description of confessional ethnographies, which include “stories of infiltration, fables of field work rapport, minimelodramas of hardships endured (and overcome), and accounts of what fieldwork did to the fieldworker”. Van Maanen explains that confessional ethnographies employ “emotional reactions, new ways of seeing things, new things to see, and various mundane but unexpected occurrences that spark insight [and] suggest how

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16 Ibid, 16.

the fieldworker came to understand a studied scene”\textsuperscript{18}. The concept of “being there” and fully immersing myself in an environment different from my own offered experiences that were both challenging and rewarding. The most difficult challenge was isolation from the rest of society, with constant reminders that few people outside of the community know Morelos exists and that its residents live in destitute conditions. Simple things that I took for granted - privacy, air conditioning, a variety of food options, and your own bed - are considered luxuries. For example, tiring of eating bread for breakfast, I purchased pancake mix to share with the rest of the family. Although pancake mix is available in local stores, people usually do not buy it because it is expensive compared to tortillas, bread, and other staple foods. Thus when I returned to my homestay, the pancake mix was considered a treat. Things considered necessities in the U.S., such as paved roads, running water, and an indoor bathroom are also not standard in Morelos. But uncomfortable accommodations were minor in comparison to the problems revealed to me during interactions with residents.

\textit{Bienvenidos a Morelos: Current Socioeconomic Conditions and Daily Living}

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid, 76.
The Costa Chica region is surrounded by mountains and is subject to earthquakes, floods, and short, but frequent, power outages during heavy rain. According to a study conducted by the Instituto Nacional De Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), there are ninety-seven Afro-descended towns in the region with a total population of 142,718. The INEGI is responsible for creating and administering the federal census every ten years as well as the census poll, which is conducted every five years; thus information from this study is the only official demographic data available on Afro-descend people in the Costa Chica. There are over 2,000 residents in Morelos, most without vehicles, or skills other than farming and homemaking. Interviewees, indicate a direct correlation between poverty, race, and government support that affects their quality of life and prevents opportunities for upward socioeconomic mobility. Without available national statistics to provide demographic information regarding race, employment, education, family structure, or health, interviewees’ insights become invaluable to understanding how these issues impact Afro-descended people in Morelos.

Due to the rural environment and absence of industry, employment in Morelos is centered on farming and production.

Perfil Sociodemográfico de localidades con presencia de población afromexicana de Oaxaca. (Mexico: INEGI, 2013), 2.
Coconuts, limes, and other crops are produced, but papaya is the most lucrative. Farming is steady work, but it does not generate sufficient income to sustain families. According to Mr. Vasquez, despite the benefit of the fertile land in Morelos, poverty exists “because the government doesn’t include us in their programs. There’s only financial support to clean the land and buy seeds; it doesn’t cover the costs for fertilizer, planting, and harvesting.”

Carlos elaborated further on the economic strain farmers in Morelos experience as a result of not receiving government support:

It costs 1,300 pesos an acre to clean the land and to rent a tractor costs 800 pesos an acre. This is what happens when the government doesn’t give support. The government doesn’t have interest in farmers in this region. How are we supposed to advance? The papaya and coconuts go to Mexico City and Guadalajara, but the coyotes steal most of it during transport. If you can’t pay them they steal it. There’s no protection from the government against coyotes. So people here work for the country, but the country doesn’t recognize us. There’s a mountain of problems here.

This detailed explanation of how limited access to government resources adversely impacts Morelos’ economy leaves little doubt that access and economic opportunity is influenced by race, national visibility, and social and cultural capital. Because Morelos is an Afro-descended town, its economic conditions will

\[\text{Carlos Vasquez (farmer) in discussion with the author, July 2, 2013.}\]

\[\text{Ibid.}\]
not be of concern to the government because Afro-descended people are not recognized as a racially or culturally distinct population. Moreover, due to the erasure of Afro-descended people’s historical contributions, it is assumed that they have no contemporary relevance and social or cultural value. Mr. Vasquez’s perspective indicates that the availability of federal programs to farmers could be instrumental to improving the economy and basic living conditions in Morelos.

Mr. Lopez also expressed similar concerns regarding the plight of farmers in particular and poverty in general:

Farmers still don’t have much because they don’t have money. Many farmers don’t have much to eat and work is not steady. There’s only work on farms cutting papaya. There are only men and few women work on farms. People earn 150 pesos a day working on a farm. The government isn’t interested in supporting farmers in Morelos. Banks don’t lend us money. It’s more difficult for farmers here and this is why the people are poor. I think there’s no help or support because the majority of people here are black and they don’t recognize us. The government helps farmers in other regions with 1,000 pesos per acre. What are we going to do, we can’t wash our color.22

Invisibility and poverty are direct consequences of blackness. The existing social and cultural climate in a national context prevents opportunities for Afro-descended people to maintain a basic standard of living and support their families. The government’s denial of assistance to Afro-descended farmers and

22 Armando Lopez (farmer) in discussion with the author, July 2, 2013.
support for the economy in Afro-descended communities further marginalizes them and signifies that they are not afforded the same privileges and opportunities as other Mexican citizens, which ultimately questions their citizenship. This lack of formal recognition as a distinct ethnic or racial group and lack of government financial assistance, makes Afro-descended people susceptible to poverty and promotes discrimination and other social issues related to public health and education.

Conversations with residents helped me contextualize observations and understand the overwhelming consequences of poverty. I asked a school director named Veronica Gutierrez, who is also a candidate for municipal office, about her motivation for being politically active. She answered, “I have been participating in political organizations for many years to help education and poverty in the community. There are many important issues. Education, health, and basic services are the most important.” As she spoke, I thought about how these concerns were relevant to my adopted family. Esmerelda Sanchez is a 48 year-old housewife, and although she is literate, she does not have a high school education because she left school and married at sixteen. Esmerelda is also a breast cancer survivor who had to travel ten hours away to Oaxaca City receive

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23 Veronica Gutierrez (school director and political candidate) in discussion with the author, June 23, 2013.
treatment, an ordeal that placed additional financial burdens on a family whose resources were already sparse.

I asked Ms. Gutierrez to speak about why she thinks poverty exists. She explained, “For the most part, people live in poverty because the government won’t develop the area. There is also a lot of government corruption.”

Ibid. 24

Jose Alonzo, her campaign worker, added, “Poverty exists because the government doesn’t help with necessities. People are frustrated because there’s no infrastructure for basic services. Look at the water that was in the room. This is no way to live.”

Ibid. 25

Mr. Alonzo was referring to water that had flooded into my room from the heavy rain of the previous day. The water had to be drained with buckets and two extra layers of cement bricks added onto the porch to prevent more flooding. This validated Ms. Gutierrez and Mr. Alonzo’s concerns about lack of basic services, along with litter in public areas because there is no sanitation service. The other campaign worker, Luis Sanchez, stated, “Migrating for better opportunities is difficult because people don’t have sufficient education to work. Education is only enough to work on a farm, so people don’t look for more

24 Ibid.

25 José Alonzo (campaign worker) in discussion with the author, June 23, 2013.
opportunities.”

Other residents confirmed this reasoning, despite acknowledging that prospects of financial stability in Morelos are non-existent.

Ms. Gutierrez also indicated that poverty creates additional problems that specifically affect women. Discussion of this issue became a passionate exchange between her and Jose. She stated, “In this region there are a lot of single mothers. Also, women don’t work outside the home, so they don’t have money, whereas the husband works on a farm.”

Mr. Alonzo immediately referred to issues concerning domestic violence. “A lot of women are unmarried and men go to the United States to work and don’t return, so there’s a lot of single mothers”, he said. Ms. Gutierrez agreed there is no equality for women and added, “Every year many young girls drop out of school at fourteen, fifteen, sixteen years-old because of poverty.”

Mr. Alonzo’s response was more direct and argued, “There’s no equality for women because of machismo and domestic violence. Women don’t have rights or resources.” I was surprised that he acknowledged how machismo oppresses women and perpetuates poverty considering that the majority of men I interviewed did

26 Luis Sanchez (campaign worker) in discussion with the author, June 23, 2013.

27 Veronica Gutierrez (school director and political candidate) in discussion with the author, June 23, 2013.
not raise the issue. Even some politically engaged residents did not view men and women as having different struggles. Ms. Guiterrez suggested that the solution is “to create programs to support single mothers and combat domestic violence.”

Ms. Sanchez shared her personal experiences with me about low education level and domestic violence. One day we were eating dinner and she became very quiet and sad. She said that when I left she would not have anyone to talk to and would go back to spending time by herself because her husband leaves in the afternoon and comes home late at night intoxicated. According to her, this has been going on throughout their marriage and used to result in him striking her. She said she often thought about leaving when her children were young, but she did not think she could provide for them financially because she married when she was sixteen, had no work experience, and no education.

Ms. Sanchez, Ms. Gutierrez, and Mr. Alonzo affirmed that women in Morelos are susceptible to the government’s shortcomings in providing equal access to resources in ways that men are not and as a result, this issue is not given as much prominence as those that also affect men. Intimate access to

Ms. Sanchez and other women who bravely told me of their

28 Ibid

29 Esmerelda Sanchez (homemaker) in discussion with the author, June 17, 2013.
experiences with domestic violence gave me specific details about the role poverty has in perpetuating domestic violence, depression, and alcoholism because these are considered private matters that must remain within the family.

I was introduced to Roberta Garcia, a sixteen year-old girl who had a two year-old daughter and lived with her husband and in-laws. Her husband, Carlos, is in his late thirties, which I found disturbing, given her age. I tried to remember the type of person I was at fourteen, the age she was when her daughter was born. I was concerned about doing well in school, spending time with my friends, and keeping up with the latest fashion trends. I could not imagine having a child that young. Disturbingly, Ms. Garcia is not literate and does not attend school because her husband expects that she stay home, clean, cook, and care for her daughter, common expectations of housewives in Morelos. The patriarchal nature of Ms. Garcia’s marriage was made apparent to me when I prepared to go to the beach with one of her family members. When asked if she wanted to go, she replied, “I can’t because I didn’t ask Carlos for permission.” The degree to which women are expected to be obedient to their husbands as well as the power imbalance inherent in marriage with someone literate, with outside work experience, suggests that women have little to no voice. As explained by her sister-in-law Ms. Sanchez, Ms. Garcia came from
a town that is smaller and more impoverished than Morelos. She and her younger brother were raised by their maternal grandmother, who is elderly and had difficulty supporting them. Ms. Sanchez doubts her sister-in-law will have opportunities for independence because she is not literate and relies solely on her husband. But she understands that Ms. Garcia probably views her marriage to an older man as “an opportunity to have a better life.”

Another pregnant teenage girl named Justina Román, who is dating Ms. Sanchez’s eighteen year-old nephew. Ms. Román is fourteen and similar to Ms. Garcia, she is not literate and came from a single-parent household in an area more impoverished than Morelos. One day while Ms. Sanchez and I were having dinner, she told me that she attempted to have a conversation with her nephew about the necessity of family planning when Ms. Román moved into the home. The conversation did not go far because her nephew said nothing and stared at the ground. Ms. Sanchez said she believed he was embarrassed to talk about the issue, which is common among families in Morelos. One can understand why Ms. Garcia and Ms. Román would view their current living arrangements as an upgrade, given their previous socioeconomic status, and be content with not pursuing opportunities that

30 Ibid.
would provide independence, such as employment or education. However, I could not ignore the reality that in thirty years they will experience similar sentiments of loneliness, confinement, and marginalization as Ms. Sanchez. Initially, I had difficulty processing my observations and remaining silent about teenage girls transitioning into adulthood prematurely. I realized that, although I found Ms. Garcia’s situation disturbing on an emotional level, I have never been put in a position in which I had to choose between living in poverty or marrying an older man to have a more secure future.

While it is common for girls to marry young and not complete their education, I did meet women who are educated and independent. For example, Blanca De Leon is a 40 year-old business owner and single mother who has been living in Morelos for twenty-one years. While she recognizes that poverty is an issue, she knows that her personal experience is different because she completed her education. Others expressed strong opinions concerning women’s lack of social value, but Ms. De Leon had to be encouraged. I referred specifically to social problems caused by unequal gender dynamics, like teen pregnancy, non-completion of education, and single-parent households. Ms. De Leon thinks that these issues are significant, but stated: "In my case, I had my daughter when I was older after I finished my studies. I had my daughter at 31 years-old; I’m a single
mother, but I can provide because I have education. I worked and studied in Pinotepa and I came back so my daughter could be with my family.”

Ms. De Leon’s assertion that her ability to support her daughter without assistance as a result of her educational background indicates a direct correlation between socioeconomic status, independence, and mobility for women in particular.

While Ms. De Leon does not relate personally with socioeconomic struggles that affect most people in Morelos, she does have a strong identification with the culture and is aware that blackness has no social value in the dominant society. When asked how she identifies, Blanca responded, “I am Afro-Mestiza because I’m mixed with black and indigenous. Being black in Morelos doesn’t mean much because almost everyone is black; there’s no difference, so there’s no racism. We’re all black or a mixture of black, so no one says ‘Go over there with the blacks’.”

Thus Ms. De Leon perceives blackness is not socially devalued, but at the same time, not a central point of discussion when everyone has black heritage. The following chapter discusses how this assumption negates the reality that the absence of blackness in national historical narratives or in

31 Blanca De Leon (business owner) in discussion with the author, June 24, 2013
32 Ibid.
national culture overall impacts some peoples’ perception of blackness. One may identify as black, but may not view it as a source of pride due to a lack of positive images and social meanings related to blackness.

Life in Morelos and throughout the Costa Chica region may provide some degree of protection from racial discrimination on an individual level. However, inequality exists on a structural level as a result of racial discrimination and the failure of the federal and state government to provide resources for Afro-descended communities. Ms. De Leon acknowledges the importance of local mobilization to improve these circumstances for Afro-descended communities:

The local movement for recognition is asking the government to support blacks because they only support the indigenous, not us. Who knows why the government doesn’t support black towns? Maybe they support the indigenous because there’s more necessity and they think black towns are rich. The towns where almost everyone is black don’t have support. I think the government doesn’t think blacks are important. There’s a lot of poverty here because there’s no jobs other than farming.\(^\text{33}\)

According to Ms. De Leon, racism and discrimination do not affect daily living in Morelos insofar as engendering attitudes that black people do not belong. However, its presence is visible in socioeconomic conditions and peoples’ ability to survive, which is directly related to the government’s lack of

\(^{33}\) Ibid.
concern for black people. Ms. De Leon is not politically involved in her community and does not feel she has similar socioeconomic hardships as others. But an important aspect of her personal identity politics is the overarching issue of federally recognized citizenship as an imperative step toward improving the status of all Afro-descended people:

When I travel outside of this region people think I’m from Cuba or Guatemala. They think there are only indigenous people in Oaxaca and I tell them there are black people too. It’s important that people outside this region know there are blacks in Mexico. If there’s a category in the census, I want to identify as Afro-Mestiza. I’m Mexican, but I’m black too.34

Implicit in Ms. De Leon’s assertion that she is a Mexican citizen of Afro-Mestiza heritage is a claim to race, place, and national identity. This assertion inserts her into the particular space of Morelos, rooted in a legacy of resistance against slavery and exploitation, and demonstrates her loyalty to promoting democracy and equality. Afro-descended people’s citizenship is questioned because it is assumed that one cannot be black and a Mexican citizen. Non-recognition as citizens, along with previously mentioned social issues makes women more vulnerable to discrimination. While Blanca’s ability to be economically independent is an example of how education can

34 Ibid.

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improve women’s status, her experience is not normative for women in Morelos.

The financial, emotional, and physical strain of poverty on women in particular is also evident in family structure. Grandmothers often raise their grandchildren because one or both parents left with a significant other, or perhaps the father works, and the mother needs assistance caring for the children. For example, in the complex where I stayed, Doña Carmen Ruiz is sixty-six years-old and widowed, and the primary caretaker for eight of her grandchildren. Two of the children’s mother left to be with another man, and their father, Doña Carmen’s son, lives in Morelos, but does not have any contact with the family. Another grandchild’s mother (Doña Carmen’s daughter) died when she was young, and Doña Carmen also raised the two older boys who have since left the house. Four other grandchildren have a mother who left to be with another man; their father, Doña Carmen’s son, works long hours on a farm, and leaving her primarily responsible for the children. One of these children is Ms. Román’s boyfriend, who works in the papaya fields, so the majority of the financial and domestic responsibilities to support Ms. Román fall on Ms. Sanchez and Doña Carmen. Thus, when Ms. Román’s child is born, they will be encumbered with more obligations that stretch their already limited resources. As indicated by several people I interviewed, these financial,
emotional, and physical strains on families are a consequence of not having access to government programs that assist in combating poverty, teen pregnancy, and substance abuse.

To provide a broader perspective of the magnitude to which teen pregnancy impacts the community, I interviewed Dr. Javier Peña, the only physician in Morelos. He is responsible for the overall health of the community as well as recording demographic information about the town’s population. These records are important considering the absence of federal statistics available that provide specific data according to race. Dr. Peña documents the number of men, women, and children, and the age range of each resident. This serves as the town’s official census. According to Dr. Peña, “the town’s population is 2,567 [1,230 women and 1,337 men], with forty percent of the population being under twenty years-old.”

Having a majority teenage population is problematic in that it inundates them with adult responsibilities, such as caring for children and working before they are emotionally and mentally mature enough to handle such responsibilities. Dr. Peña explained that “there are few programs for teen pregnancy or sexually transmitted disease prevention and teenagers younger than fifteen years-old are

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35 Dr. Javier Peña (physician) in discussion with the author, July 7, 2013.
having children.” 36 As we have seen, teenage pregnancy places financial and emotional stress on individuals and families as well as the community. The absence of funding from federal and state programs to combat teen pregnancy and other health issues, such as diabetes and hypertension, makes it increasingly difficult for Dr. Peña to provide adequate urgent and preventative care for patients. Furthermore according to Dr. Peña, the government has specifically expressed unwillingness to assist in providing resources for medical care:

There are many people who come for consultations, but I do not have time to see everyone because I need more personnel to assist with consults as well as promoting healthy living. A lot of health problems exist because of poverty. There are more medical resources in Oaxaca and Acapulco, but it’s far for patients to travel. I have written proposals to the government asking for more resources, but they do not respond quickly, and when they do the response is that there are resources to help the indigenous. 37

Dr. Peña handed me an official federal government form used to document daily consultations. In the section marked general data, Dr. Peña must identify each patient’s name, age, gender, and indicate if they are of indigenous descent. Because there is no category or question to identify Afro-descend people, Dr. Peña is unable to request resources to support issues that impact this community. While it can be argued that Afro-

36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
descended people could strategically identify as indigenous for the purpose of having access to government resources, this option does not resolve the underlying issue of racism and discrimination against Afro-descended people. Furthermore, negating their ethnic and cultural background would validate their marginalization and confirm that blackness has no place in the national culture. Federal recognition is necessary for the social, political, and economic advancement of Afro-descended people in Morelos as well as in other parts of the country. Local efforts to mobilize residents in Morelos and surrounding communities to build awareness about issues that impact this portion of the population and advocate for federal recognition are gaining momentum. Organizations and individuals participating in these efforts are essential to challenging the national and state governments to uphold the federal constitution, which declares Mexico an equitable society that deems discrimination on the basis of race, religion, sexual orientation, or culture unconstitutional.

Re-Defining Blackness in a Mestizo Nation: Political Mobilization and the Struggle for National Recognition

To people outside of Morelos and other Afro-descended towns, the importance of being nationally recognized as such can be unclear. It could further ostracize them from the broader population and reinforce discrimination, a point argued by
Christina Sue who finds it applicable to Afro-descended people in Veracruz:

Through vacillation and displays of a fleeting connection to blackness, Veracruzanos avoid a direct confrontation with the national belief that there are no Mexican blacks. If Veracruzanos of African descent were to stake an unequivocal claim to blackness, they would be relegating themselves to the margins of the Mexican nation; in other words, asserting a strong black identity would place their national identity in jeopardy. The interconnection between ideas of race and nation in Mexico creates strong incentives Veracruzanos of African descent to manage their race-color identities in a way that does not conflict with their Mexican identity.38

While there is legitimacy to their argument which may be significant for some residents in Morelos, the majority does not express sentiments that to embrace their Afro-descended or black heritage conflicts with their identity as Mexicans. Instead, it is a motivation for claiming blackness and utilizing it as a source of pride, because being black is not the problem; the problem is the racism and discrimination that engenders oppression. One group that is promoting such sentiment is called the Organization for the Social and Productive Development of Afro-descended and Indigenous Communities. Its president, 28 year-old Jaime Flores, is a native of Morelos and travels throughout the region mobilizing people in other Afro-

38 Christina A. Sue, Land of the Cosmic Race, 125.
descended towns. In discussing the purpose of the organization, Mr. Flores reiterated concerns expressed by other residents:

We’re working to promote social awareness on a national level about Afro-Mexican towns here in the Costa Chica. The goals of the organization are to promote awareness of all forms of discrimination, such as racism and xenophobia; Afro-Mexican culture; and support for the production of goods that sustain these communities. This is a particular concern because support from the government has failed and there’s no interest in growing small businesses. We also advocate for women, children, single mothers, senior citizens, and teenagers.39

This important organization offers an outlet through which the concerns of residents in Morelos and other Afro-descended towns can be heard. While federal acknowledgement of Afro-descended people will not end inequality, it will provide avenues for legal recourse when it occurs and combat social stigmas associated with blackness. However, national recognition would be purely symbolic without direct government action to implement social, cultural, and educational programs in Afro-descended communities as well as the consideration of initiatives to remove discriminatory language from national and state structures, such as the educational system, that perpetuate the invisibility of Afro-descended people. More importantly, the national narrative of the country’s legacy from the Spanish Conquest, to Independence, to the Revolution and beyond must be

39 Jaime Flores (organization president and teacher) in discussion with the author, June 29, 2013.
re-envisioned to be inclusive of all groups who do not fit within the traditional mestizo culture. As described by Mr. Flores, informing the federal and state government of the socioeconomic struggles in Morelos and other Afro-Mexican towns and generating political pressure to act on these concerns is an initial step toward eliminating Afro-descended people’s invisibility.

Because the economy in Morelos and other such communities is dependent on farming and production, the financial health of this industry is a central component of grassroots mobilization throughout the region. When discussing why economic sustainability is an issue, activist Jaime Flores explained, “for approximately fifteen or twenty years, Morelos has been a quiet community that is growing from the production of papaya, but also growing in problems because many people don’t have access to benefits that result from papaya production.” The absence of diverse economic investment limits employment prospects and industrial growth, and does not create opportunities for all people to participate. For example, as

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41 Jaime Flores (organization president and teacher) in discussion with the author, June 29, 2013.
mentioned by local farmers, this is not an industry in which women typically work. Because farming and production dominate the economy, women’s options for employment are further limited, thereby making them economically dependent on men. Additionally, while papaya production offers potential lucrative gains, according to Mr. Flores, the costs involved and politics in hiring practices exclude many people from profiting from this type of work:

To plant papaya you need an initial investment of 100,000 – 200,000 pesos and not all families have the resources to compete in the economy (papaya production), so there are few opportunities for development. For example, before people here cut lime, which was more beneficial because everyone could go cut limes from children to senior citizens, but now not everyone has access to papaya production because of the investment that is required. The only way to excel is to be a laborer for the papaya owners, but we are not included. Many people that come to work for the papaya owners are from the indigenous towns around here because they work for less. Work is limited for people in Morelos.  

The general consensus that there are insufficient employment opportunities suggests that Morelos and other Afro-descended communities in the region can benefit from federal job programs that provide educational and skills training. Obtaining these qualifications will enable Afro-descended people to be competitive in the job market and assist in financially sustaining families. However, this can only be achieved once

42 Ibid.
Afro-Mexican or Afro-descended becomes a nationally recognized category, and recognition grows that historical and contemporary elements have contributed to this population being erased from national memory and relegated to geographically isolated areas.

Conclusions

The current social, economic, and political status of Afro-descended people in Mexican society, particularly in the coastal region of Oaxaca, highlights historical and sustained inequities in the construction of national identity and citizenship. Grassroots mobilization efforts throughout the coastal region promote the necessity of self-identification as Afro-descended to gain collective rights and improve conditions for their families and communities. In the town of José Maria Morelos in particular, much is at stake for the success of these efforts, given the severity of social problems with regard to poverty, public health, teen pregnancy, education, and employment. The overall invisibility and erasure of Afro-descended people from national memory makes petitioning government agencies for assistance further challenging and reinforces perceptions that blackness is not relevant in Mexican society. However, for the residents of Morelos and other Afro-descended towns in the region, blackness is the historical foundation of the town, and the essential aspect of their lived experience. This legacy must be as glorified in national memory as the Spanish Conquest,
the struggle for independence, and the Revolution. Reinserting Afro-descended people into the national space will also assist in challenging the correlation between race, poverty, civil rights, and citizenship.

Conducting field work in Morelos provided me an opportunity to engage these issues beyond an intellectual level and personally experience their impact on people in this community. Hearing stories such as Ms. Garcia’s made me more cognizant of my privilege as a U.S. citizen in Mexico that enables me to move freely throughout the country, a luxury that is not afforded Ms. Garcia and others like her. McDermott and Madan argue in “Avoiding the Missionary (Dis)position”, this level of personal reflection is necessary in qualitative research to analyze the relationship between the researcher and the subject population because it challenges the researcher to consider their positionality during the research process. I could relate to Ms. Garcia and Ms. Román to an extent; we are of the same race and gender, and I came from a single-parent household and was raised by extended family. However, the hardship I experienced is not comparable to the pervasive socioeconomic conditions in Morelos. Traveling there forced me to confront issues that were

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initially difficult, but transformed into moments that enriched my perspective of humanity and the significance of on-the-ground research. My presence in the field allowed intimate interactions with local people that would not have been possible without first establishing a rapport, which reassured them that I am trustworthy, non-judgmental, and genuine. These character traits, along with flexibility are imperative to ensuring the success of data collection and promoting a positive experience in the field.

My personal struggle with what I was learning about the status of women indicates of what Geertz characterizes as “being there”. He argues that “‘being there’ personally…demands at the minimum hardly more than a travel booking and permission to land; a willingness to endure a certain amount of loneliness, invasion of privacy, and physical discomfort.’”44 In my case the discomfort was emotional, a struggle to reconcile the pervasiveness of domestic violence, teen pregnancy, and other factors that limit women’s mobility with my personal experience of being empowered by my education and independence. This is a manifestation of what Geertz describes as the difficulty ethnographers have in getting themselves into their text as well

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as into the culture.\textsuperscript{45} I certainly did have difficulty placing myself into the culture as I could not imagine being a fourteen year-old mother without an education and economically dependent on my husband. However, I have no difficulty placing myself in the text because I realize that my purpose for being in Morelos is to discuss my personal development during the research process as well as the research itself. McDermott states, “while I may be able to share my life jacket with a few people, I must also keep my attention on working to disrupt the flow of the current. I still have a lot of unlearning to do, and the longer I stay in the water…the clearer my role becomes.”\textsuperscript{46} This metaphoric explanation of the research process’s impact on the researcher accurately describes my experience in Morelos. While I was deeply affected by the impoverished conditions I witnessed, I looked forward to returning to my modest, but comfortable home with running water, central air conditioning, and laminate floors. As I reflect on being in the field and progress further into the writing process, I am more determined to continue analyzing questions regarding race, poverty, identity fashioning, and citizenship. As will be discussed in the following chapter, Afro-descended people’s ability to

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, 17.

\textsuperscript{46} Mairi McDermott and Athena Madan, “Avoiding the Missionary (Dis)position”, 237.
effectively petition for equal access to government resources is contingent on the addition of a category in the federal census that enables them to identify as a racial or ethnic group. Challenges to achieving this goal include resistance from government institutions responsible for creating and disseminating the federal census, general ignorance regarding blackness, and the existence of Afro-descended people in Mexico.
CHAPTER 5

EXPANDING IDEAS OF MEXICANIDAD: POSSIBILITIES FOR GOVERNMENT RECOGNITION OF AFRO-MEXICANS AS A POPULATION

Our solitude has the same roots as religious feelings. It is a form of orphanhood, an obscure awareness that we have been torn from the All, and an ardent search: a flight and a return, an effort to re-establish the bonds that unite us with the universe.  
- Octavio Paz, The Labyrinth of Solitude 1950

Introduction

The year 2010 marked significant achievements in the struggle for Afro-descended people’s collective rights and citizenship throughout Latin America. Countries such as Chile, Argentina, Panama, Paraguay, Venezuela, Uruguay, and Bolivia included a category for Afro-descended people to be identified in the national census. In many of these countries it had been more than 100 years since Afro-descended people had been officially recognized by the government. The ability to be located in a contemporary government document delegitimizes contentions that Afro-descended people do not exist and are not native to these countries. The surge in federal recognition of Afro-descended populations throughout Latin America indicates the urgency of this issue and demands attention from local, state, and federal governments as well as the international community.
Mexico is one of the last Latin American countries that have failed to officially acknowledge its Afro-descended population and collect data regarding health, education, employment, and other significant social and economic issues. While historical legacies of exclusion, marginalization, and ideologies such as mestizaje, limpieza de sangre, and blanquemento also exist in other countries that have since granted recognition to its Afro-descended citizens, more complex challenges are present in Mexico, given its unique development of national and cultural identity that is ingrained in tradition, yet simultaneously created new definitions of what it means to be Mexican. As such, this chapter will argue that twentieth century constructions of Mexicanidad, or Mexican-ness as discussed by Mexican intellectual Octavio Paz, is the defining feature of national identity discourse from its publication in 1950 to the early 1990s. Paz emphasizes the necessity for a philosophy that engages national unification, identity, and culture, and is distinctly Mexican unlike nineteenth century positivism, and post-revolutionary mestizaje.

which are European influenced and thus foreign concepts that are not appropriate in analyzing Mexican national identity construction and culture. While Paz is critical of previous attempts by Mexican intellectuals such as Jose Vasconcelos to describe the nation’s character, his definition of Mexicanidad also provides an incomplete examination because it perpetuates twentieth century racial and national identity constructions of the mestizo as the representative feature of Mexican culture, while subjugating indigenous people and completely ignoring Afro-descended Mexicans.

The concept of citizenship and collective identity is not considered in a multicultural context until 1992, with federal and state constitutional amendments recognizing the historical and continued significance of indigenous groups to the foundation of Mexico. Despite the inclusion of indigenous people in official discussions of race, citizenship, and civil rights, providing the same protection for Afro-descended people is not present in these discussions. This chapter will also analyze the social, economic, and political significance of indigenous inclusion and Afro-descended exclusion from federal and state policies that expand the meaning of Mexicanidad by addressing national identity from a multicultural perspective. The chapter will further discuss obstacles that prevent institutional
recognition of Afro-descended Mexicans as a racial or ethnic group as well as grassroots activism and coalition building with non-governmental organizations to promote awareness and education about the impacts of socioeconomic and political exclusion.

Interviews with local activists in the Afro-descended town of Jose Maria Morelos will be used as primary sources to highlight specific examples of how Afro-descended people’s civil rights are violated and the absence of legal recourse when such instances occur. The interviews will also describe other socioeconomic and political problems that government recognition will address, and how the overall quality of life for Afro-descended Mexicans could be improved. Finally, the chapter will analyze progress toward recognition and ways in which ideas concerning Mexicanidad can be expanded to include Afro-descended Mexicans.

A Traves de los Ojos de Octavio Paz: Post-Revolutionary Discussions of Mexicanidad in The Labyrinth of Solitude

As discussed in previous chapters, the social, economic, and political significance of the Mexican Revolution extends beyond armed conflict and the creation of a democratic government. The revolution also emphasized retaining tradition, culture, and national identity to promote a more unified
citizenry. After three decades of being defined by a dictatorship that encouraged foreign capital investment and cultural ideals, Mexican intellectuals, artists, and writers were charged with producing art and literature that reflected the current status of the nation and discussed its prospects for the future. While Octavio Paz was not the only intellectual to tackle such issues, his analysis of Mexicandidad or Mexican-ness in the *Labyrinth of Solitude* challenges previous analyses of national identity and culture while proposing a unique perspective on the current meaning of being Mexican.²

Published ten years after the end of the revolution in 1950, the *Labyrinth of Solitude* critiques mestizaje as discussed by Jose Vasconcelos in *La Raza Cosmica* as a continued perpetuation of European culture, ideals, and traditions prevalent during the Porfirian dictatorship. Paz argues that “these apparent contradictions all demand a new examination of our history and also of our culture.”³ His specific criticism of *La Raza Cosmica* is that it “contains fragments that are still alive and fecund, portions that still illuminate and even

² For further discussion of Mexicandidad, see Samuel Ramos, *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico.* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1972) and Leopoldo Zea Aguilar, *From Mexicandidad to a Philosophy of History.* (Ontario, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1980).

prophesy, but it does not contain the essentials of our being or our culture.”⁴ According to Paz, mestizaje ideology, similar to European influences as embraced by nineteenth century Positivism is not an appropriate lens through which Mexican national culture and identity should be examined. Paz’s objection in intellectual analyses of Mexican identity construction is that the majority of Mexican citizens do not know who they are because of failed attempts to fit in with U.S. and European culture. The trajectory of foreign imposed ideals leads Paz to the conclusion that “we [Mexicans] are truly different. And we are truly alone.”⁵ Here is the definition of solitude that Paz suggests has characterized the nation and ultimately contributed to its identity crisis. Paz further argues that because there is no authentic lens through which to view themselves, Mexicans “are naked and...are confronted by an equally naked reality...What we [Mexicans] desperately need is a concrete solution, one that will give meaning to our presence on earth.”⁶ As will be further discussed, while the revolution was successful in providing democracy, it failed to capitalize on the unique historical

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⁵ Ibid, 19.

moment and raise questions concerning national identity that expressed the specific character of the nation.

Paz’s arguments also indicate that not having an authentic sense of identity causes destruction of the self, which he refers to as “a form of orphanhood, an obscure awareness that we have been torn from the All.” His reference to the All implies that one’s traditions, culture, and sense of self is inextricably linked to the nation’s origins and that continuing to look to other sources further distances the nation from realizing its true self. To resolve this issue, Paz contends that Mexicans must look within and rediscover to define who they are. Paz perceives the Mexican Revolution as a turning point in the trajectory of outside cultural influence in which “the Mexican…is aware at last…of his fellow Mexican.” However, despite prospects to change the development of national character, the intellectual phase of the revolution fails because the nation turned toward foreign identity constructions rather than creating a philosophy that reflects Mexican history, culture, and tradition. In terms of nation-building, the revolution failed to provide “wholeness and coherence” and answer pertinent questions that would engender unity, such as

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7 Ibid, 20.
8 Ibid, 149.
“What is the meaning of Mexican tradition and what is its current value?” As Paz argues, these questions are important to consider when a nation is seeking to forge its identity and establish itself from other nations.

Although Paz’s critiques regarding the pervasiveness of European and U.S. influence in shaping national identity construction are valid, one must question his omission of racial construction and its historical role in crafting national identity from his analysis. Furthermore, there is no discussion of the presence of diverse cultures and ethnic groups that exist within Mexico and how they are central to the historical establishment of the nation as well as its current state. Whereas Vasconcellos and other post-revolutionary anti-Positivist intellectuals may have failed by perpetuating foreign constructions of identity and culture, Paz’s analysis is equally ineffective in defining national character because it assumes that it can be formed after a period of solitude in which Mexicans look inward. However, this internal look at oneself or one’s history, culture, and nation is not accurate without a discussion of racial identity. Paz’s omission of race is indicative of twentieth century narratives that present Mexico as a race-less society and reference the importance of national

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identity, which implies that racial “others” are not included in this construct.

Given the complexity in defining the Mexican character, other Mexican scholars also have critiqued Paz’s analysis of the Mexican character, arguing that it perpetuates methods of control that are consistent with previous characterizations of national culture. In particular, Roger Bartra challenges the process and necessity of forming a collective identity and considers studies engaging the concept of Mexican-ness as weak points in national phenomena.\(^\text{10}\) In synthesizing the historical trajectory of literature concerned with defining the national character, Bartra asserts that images and symbols of the Mexican “as sentimental and violent, passionate and aggressive, resentful and rancorous,… a man in flight seeking refuge from the sad reality around him, were created to present a unified vision of national identity.”\(^\text{11}\) Carefully constructed images and symbols, such as the mestizo, the patriotic macho, the pachuco, and the pelado were reproduced through film, television, and literature and presented as authentic representations of


\(^{11}\) Roger Bartra, *The Cage of Melancholy,* 124.
national culture. For these reasons, Bartra views national culture as an imaginary, yet powerful construct and intends to disrupt these narratives by highlighting their inability to define what it means to be Mexican.

In addition to the construction of stereotypical images presented as national culture, Bartra challenges the process through which a collective identity is formed, describing it as hegemonic, with the intention to create a particular type of citizen:

The idea that a unique subject, ‘the Mexican,’ exists in national history is a powerfully cohesive illusion; the structuralist or functionalist versions, which focus less on the Mexican as subject and more on the specific text of Mexicanness, equally form part of the cultural processes of the modern state’s political legitimation. The definition of ‘the Mexican’ is rather a description of how he or she is dominated and, above all, how exploitation is legitimised. Thus the idea that national culture can be defined is more instrumental to the State’s ability to maintain control over its citizens than it is in unifying the population. Bartra’s contention that images are constructed to reinforce top-down

\[\text{12 Bartra describes the patriotic macho as a man who “endeavors to hide his melancholic alter ego and to show instead the face of a revolutionary” Ibid, 114. The image of the pelado is portrayed as an urban peasant who is caught between the city and rural life. A pelado is considered “course, uneducated, and uncouth” Ibid, 33. Similar to the pelado, the pachuco represents a man who has abandoned rural life and “manages to install himself in that urban industrial universe dominated by modern capitalism” Ibid, 90.}\]

\[\text{13 Ibid, 6.}\]
perspectives of culture further establish that the State has a history of excluding characteristics from sectors of that population that are considered undesirable or counterproductive to its mission.

In a similar fashion, Claudio Lomnitz-Adler argues that seminal texts defining national culture contain incomplete analyses because they only engage a political and not theoretical framework. Lomnitz presents this analysis in *Exits from the Labyrinth*, in which he reinterprets studies on national culture to develop social scientific findings that emphasize culture from a regional rather than national perspective. Similar to Bartra, Lomnitz is critical of the idea of culture existing in a national space and acknowledges the saliency of Bartra’s contention that national culture is imagined, however, he also recognizes that “deconstructions of representations of Mexican national culture have not corroded the cultural bases that suggest the existence of national culture”.\(^\text{14}\) The ongoing debate over how national culture is defined and its sociopolitical impacts in shaping Mexican society indicate its centrality to understanding social, cultural, and political dynamics. While there is much debate about what defines culture, the national

discourse is clear that blackness is outside of this discussion. Despite the evolution of national identity constructions to include indigenous people, Afro-descended Mexicans continue to be labeled as not representative of national culture and non-Mexican.

Crafting Mexicanidad in the 21st Century: Social Impacts of Excluding Blackness in Civil Rights Protection and Popular Culture

While post-revolutionary discussions of Mexicanidad subverted the importance of indigenous cultures, this negation was rectified with federal constitutional reform in 1992 that acknowledged the historical and ongoing relevance of indigenous groups to the national character. As indicated in Article 4 of the Constitutional Reform on January 28, 1992, “the nation has a multicultural composition originally sustained in its indigenous peoples. The law will protect and promote their languages, cultures, customs, and specific forms of social organization and guarantee they are granted access to state jurisdiction.”¹⁵ The state of Oaxaca also recognized the historical and cultural significance of indigenous groups in creating a multicultural

society with a constitutional reform effective June 19, 1998.

Article 2 of the Oaxaca State Constitution declares:

The state of Oaxaca has a plural-ethnic composition sustained by the preponderance of its indigenous peoples and communities whose cultural and historical roots are intertwined with those of the Mesoamerican civilization; speak their own language; have permanently and continue to occupy territories they have built in their specific cultures, which is what identifies them as unlike the rest of the state's population. These towns and communities have existed prior to the formation of the state of Oaxaca and were the basis for the state's political and territorial confirmation. This law recognizes that they have social rights.\(^{16}\)

This excludes Afro-descended people. While formal recognition of indigenous people as central to the multi-cultural landscape both at the national and state level is significant in de-otherizing indigenous groups, erasing social stigma, and solidifying equal rights, the absence of similar discussion related to Afro-descended Mexicans validates existing misconceptions that blackness, and by extension, black people are foreign to Mexico. Moreover, the federal and state government’s assertion that indigenous people’s contribution to the foundation of national culture entitles them to civil rights provides legal protection and recourse when these rights are violated. While it is important to note that federal and state

constitutional reforms did not completely resolve indigenous struggles for equality as racism and prejudice continue to persist, an attempt by the government to address these issues carries meaning that is beyond symbolic. These constitutional reforms locate indigenous people in Mexican history as ethnic groups that established independent cultural, social, and economic institutions and legitimize them as Mexican citizens.

As discussed in previous chapters, both indigenous people and Afro-descended Mexicans are otherized. However, the latter group is further marginalized by historical and continued exclusion. According to political scientist Juliet Hooker, indigenous groups and Afro-descended people in Latin America are victims of social exclusion and racial discrimination. Hooker defines social exclusion as “the inability of a social group to fully participate in the social, political, cultural, and economic spheres of society” and employs “poverty, lack of access to basic social services, unemployment and labor market

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discrimination” as indicators for racial discrimination.\textsuperscript{18} Despite experiencing similar socioeconomic hardships, what separates the two groups in terms of national and state approaches to multicultural citizenship is what Hooker calls, “indigenous inclusion/black exclusion.”\textsuperscript{19} Hooker’s analysis of Afro-descended people’s overarching socioeconomic and political status in Latin America speaks directly to the current position of Afro-descended Mexicans. As discussed in chapter four, poverty, inadequate education, unstable local economies, discrimination, and unavailability of state or federal resources adversely impacts Afro-descended Mexicans’ quality of life and their ability to assert their rights as citizens. Social, political, and cultural exclusion from participating as full citizens reinforces Afro-descended people’s marginalization and furthers narrow constructions of Mexicanidad that only consider Spanish and indigenous influence and validates the presence of people from these backgrounds. Considering the lack of institutional acknowledgement of racism and discrimination against Afro-descended people, it is clear that this is the


\textsuperscript{19} Juliet Hooker, “Indigenous Inclusion/Black Exclusion”, 289.
primary cause for why their legal status as citizens is tenuous and that of indigenous groups is concrete.

The historical exclusion of Afro-descended and, to some extent, indigenous people is a trend throughout Latin America. Some government agencies are compiling data to raise awareness about the severity of this issue. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (CEPAL) is located in Santiago, Chile and published a document titled, *Indigenous and Afro-descended Towns in the Censuses for Population and Living in 2010*. The document provides demographic information from 2010 censuses in all Latin American countries, focusing specifically on opportunities for self-identification as Afro-descended or indigenous. The CEPAL lists the following motives for creating this document and argues that these are common denominators that contribute to exclusion and poverty among Afro-descended and indigenous groups:

- Indigenous and Afro-descended people are active social and political actors in the region: They demand recognition.
- State obligations to extend rights to indigenous and Afro-descended people: They demand information.
- International human rights standards are mandatory for states: Information as a tool for promoting rights.
- Fundamental technical tools for the design, implementation, and monitoring of political policies.
- Necessity to include identification of indigenous and Afro-descended people in all data sources.
Demand various human rights are included in regional and international agreements: Access to information is a right.\textsuperscript{20}

The document’s broad scope in analyzing Afro-descended people’s exclusion in Latin America through categories for self-identification in federal censuses reinforces the significance of institutionalized racism and discrimination adversely impacting their social, political, and economic access. The CEPAL’s arguments also reveal that federal recognition alone does not sufficiently address the historical and present marginalization of Afro-descended people. The emphasis on the necessity to establish state civil rights laws and enforce international human rights regulations is imperative to ensuring that Afro-descended people have equal protection as citizens of their respective countries.

The continued exclusion of Afro-descended people from full participation in social, economic, and political processes impedes their visibility and devalues blackness, which can cause Afro-descended people to question their sense of self. Without institutional protection from civil rights abuses, formal recognition of Afro-descended people in the development of the nation, or positive images of blackness in popular culture,

\textsuperscript{20} Comisión Económica para América Latina y el Caribe, Pueblos Indígenas y Afrodescendientes en los Censos de Población y Vivienda de la Década 2010. (Santiago, Chile: CELADE-CEA/CEPAL-UNFPA, October 22-24, 2013), 3-4.
Afro-descended people have no means of locating themselves in the national discourse that reflects both their racial and national identities. For example, the popular comic Memín Pingúin highlights a dark-skinned black Cuban boy named Memín, who has exaggerated facial features that resemble a chimpanzee. This character was first introduced in a daily magazine called Pepín in 1947 and was published as a comic book in 1964. Memín is further described as a “friendly, but mediocre third grader who is sincere and has an honest soul, but is also malicious and cheats.” While it can be argued that Memín is a harmless fictional character, and that sensible people know that human beings do not resemble chimpanzees regardless of their race, the symbolism in regards to national culture, citizenship, and identity cannot be dismissed. As discussed by Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas, “the intention of Memín is to express anti-black discourse as part of the mythical discourse of whitening through mestizaje.” The commeration of Memín in a federal stamp issued in 2005 speaks to the influence the character has had in popular culture and cannot easily be dismissed. By


22 Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas, “Memín Pinguín”, 52.

23 Ibid, 53. The Memín character was also commemorated in a postage stamp in 2005, which quickly sold out and resulted in a resurgence of the comic book’s popularity.
associating negative character traits and unhuman physical characteristics with black people, the Memín character further solidifies Afro-descended Mexicans’ invisibility while simultaneously legitimizing their oppression. Furthermore, the popularity of the comic suggests that stereotypical caricatures of Afro-descended people are acceptable because they are not representative of Mexican national culture, tradition, or identity. The Memín character also highlights a contradiction within Mexican society that allows for a fictitious, stereotypical image of blackness to be commemorated, but not the historical legacy of Afro-descended Mexicans or recognition of this population in the federal census. Limiting constructions of Mexicanidad enables the erasure of positive historical images of Afro-descended people and asserts that they are not part of Mexican culture, but presents clear ideas of blackness in popular culture that promotes stereotypes.

The inability to locate oneself within national frameworks beyond slavery or stereotypical caricatures, and the lack of irrefutable validation of Afro-descended people as Mexican citizens further solidifies that current constructions of mexicanidad give no consideration to the relationship between blackness and citizenship. Institutional disregard of the existing presence of Afro-descended people can result in
questioning the utility of working toward dismantling such narratives. For activists such as Jaime Flores, this is especially challenging on a local level in terms of mobilizing residents in his area to participate in the movement for recognition:

Many people in the town prefer not to identify as black. They say ‘If I say I’m black what can I gain?’ But I think we can gain more if more people identify as black. There’s people here that don’t feel they’re a part of this [the movement]. They say blacks are in La Boquilla or Collantes because the people there are darker skinned. This is due to blacks not having recognition. There’s nothing to motivate people to identify as black. There’s resistance to identifying as black because it’s taught that black means bad, that black is ugly, and black means sadness. People have a negative impression of blackness. We have to teach that black is beautiful, blacks are intelligent, the black woman is beautiful. It’s not true that blacks are ugly. 

Mr. Flores’s example of some residents rejecting identification with blackness by labeling other towns as distinctly black spaces indicates that it has no social value and can thus be perceived as counterproductive to national cohesion and further marginalizes Afro-descended people. The perspective that blackness in particular creates division in regard to national

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24 Jaime Flores (organization president and teacher) in discussion with the author, June 29, 2013.

unity is evident in popular statements such as “Somos Mexicanos. No hay negros aqui.” These generalizations are commonly made by people who subscribe to national discourses that negate the presence of Afro-descended people.

The issue of contesting their historical and continued significance in national narratives, affirming citizenship and civil rights, and advocating for federal recognition is complex and requires delicate navigation between constructions of race and national identity. On a theoretical level, national identity constructions emphasize Mexican-ness as the primary category for identity and treats race as an outside imposition (primarily from the United States). However, in reality, race has a central role in determining socioeconomic status, access to resources, and overall quality of life. The complexity in articulating self-identity and national identity is an issue because, as geographer Odile Hoffmann argues, “these identities can only be expressed where there are legitimizing frameworks – precisely what black Mexicans lack, since they have no place on the

26 Jose Vasconcelos makes comparisons between historical and current race relations in the United States and Latin America in La Raza Cosmica. The comparisons are made to argue that contentious race relation in Latin America do not exist as a result of racial and cultural mixing that created a “comic race” that represents the best attributes from all racial and ethnic groups. Vasconcelos crafts the argument that racial categorization facilitates discrimination and racism, which is only resolved through racial and cultural amalgamation.
national identity chessboard.” Consequently, constructions of Mexicanidad have yet to reflect the racial and ethnic diversity that exists in Mexico and to fulfill its purpose of creating an authentic self-analysis.

In addition to limiting constructions of citizenship, other factors such as how racial and ethnic groups are formally defined present obstacles to institutional recognition of Afro-descended Mexicans. The existing definition for legal recognition as an ethnic group as established by the Instituto Nacional de Estadística, y Geografía (INEGI), requires that people within that population have distinct cultural elements, as with indigenous cultures, and speak a language other than Spanish. While this definition is applicable to indigenous groups because they are still culturally as well as linguistically connected to their heritage, it is not an accurate measure for considering Afro-descended Mexicans as an ethnic group. This sentiment is expressed by Tómas Ortiz, a primary school director in Morelos:

Black towns are not present in public politics or any form of federal program because they are denied access. For example, the CDI says for a town to have access to these

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programs, 40 percent of the population has to speak a marginalized language.\textsuperscript{29}

The expectation that Afro-descended Mexicans speak a language other than Spanish ignores the historical and cultural impact of slavery and the colonial caste system, which discouraged African cultural and linguistic preservation. Within the colonial caste system, the term bozal denotes an African who is recently arrived from Africa and not yet assimilated to Spanish culture, such as being baptized Catholic and speaking Spanish. This term has a lower social and class standing than the term ladino, which denotes an African who is acculturated with Spanish customs.\textsuperscript{30} Thus, the prerequisite that legal categorization as an ethnic group is contingent on a collective non-Spanish language presents an unreasonable challenge in Afro-descended people’s struggle for civil rights.

The INEGI’s construction of what qualifies as an ethnic group is significant because the organization collects data

\textsuperscript{29} Tómas Ortiz, (school director and community activist) in discussion with the author, June 28, 2013.

pertaining to health, education, employment and other demographic information for the federal census. In 2005, the INEGI attributed the absence of statistical data on Afro-descended Mexicans to their inability to include race in the census because it would be discriminatory since the term “race” is associated with discrimination.31 Ambiguous attitudes towards race and reluctance to discuss racism is an indicator of the success of mestizaje and national projects that position Mexico as a utopia where race problems that exist in countries such as the United States are of no importance. However, as discussed in chapter four and will be further discussed in the current chapter, the absence of civil rights laws that protect Afro-descended people leave them vulnerable to racism, discrimination, and socioeconomic exclusion. As a result, Afro-descended people are disproportionately affected by poverty, lack of education, and public health issues. As suggested by a local activist, quantitative and qualitative data collection in an official capacity, such as in the national census, would assist in minimizing these issues. Currently, “the law

requires that the census specifically asks who is indigenous only through the question of if you speak the language. The options given for ethnic group instead of asking if you are Amuzgo or Triqui, could ask if you are of African descent’".32

While providing a category for Afro-descended Mexicans to self-identify racially and ethnically is central to the availability of social, economic, and political demographic information, this alone will not solve the issue of marginalization. Concerted efforts must be made to educate Afro-descended communities about the census process to ensure that it is accessible to them and that they are aware of how their communities could benefit from racial and ethnic identification. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean provides the following recommendations on how the census process could be more inclusive of Afro-descended and indigenous people:

- Include a generational plan for specific information and investigations from the 2010 census for the integration of indigenous and Afro-descended towns.
- Revise and adapt the existing instruments.
- Guarantee full and effective participation of indigenous and Afro-descended towns in all stages of the census process.
- Pay particular attention to zones that are difficult to access. Respect the rights and privacy of indigenous and Afro-descended towns during initial contact.33

32 Ibid.
In addition to the necessity to educate people in Afro-descended communities about the census process, these recommendations indicate that people within the INEGI need to be educated regarding cultural sensitivity and the impact historical and continued socioeconomic exclusion has on these communities in order for the census process to be effective. As will be discussed further in the chapter, the INEGI has made significant efforts to collaborate with Afro-descended community organizations to consider possibilities for recognition in the census since their initial claim in 2005 that Afro-descended people do not qualify as a racial or ethnic group. The invisibility of Afro-descended people in documentation of national culture and statistics also presents challenges in retaining local cultural and economic traditions within Afro-descended communities.

A History Repressed: Displacing Blackness and Reaffirming Mexicandad as Mestizo

Furthering Hoffmann’s contention that the absence of an official framework that recognizes Afro-descended people can be challenging for them to rectify a black self-identity with a
Mexican national one, preserving cultural and economic traditions in Afro-descended communities is also difficult for similar reasons. As mentioned in chapter four, grassroots activists and elder community members in the Afro-descended town of Morelos are concerned that significant aspects of the culture, such as oral tradition, will cease to exist because younger generations have no interest in learning about their heritage. Compounded with images in popular culture and national history that negate blackness or represent it negatively, activist Jaime Flores explains that the majority of young people in Morelos and other Afro-descended towns in the area are not interested in learning about their culture because “they are influenced by music from the United States and other countries and prefer to be a part of globalization than promote their own culture. They’ve forgotten the value of the community, which is part of the principle problem for all the communities in this municipality.”

Consequently, limiting constructions of national identity that acknowledge indigenous cultures, but not Afro-descended people, results in the culture not being preserved in the form of museums, archives, or as this example indicates, oral tradition, because younger generations do not believe their culture is valuable.

34 Jaime Flores, (organization president and teacher) in discussion with the author, June 29, 2013.
Contemporary constructions of citizenship, culture, and national identity are influenced by existing social and culture mores as well as historical memory. As suggested by Octavio Paz, Mexican identity is engrained in a connection to the past and identification with historical traditions. However, it is difficult for Afro-descended people to assert their Mexican identity when specific images that locate them in national history have been whitewashed. As indicated by Tómas Ortiz, a primary school director and local activist in Morelos, the erasure of Afro-descended people from national history presents significant challenges in gaining federal recognition as a population:

There are many consequences of non-recognition that we can speak about. However, for me, the most important is the whitening of Mexican history. The official history doesn’t acknowledge the role of black towns in the construction of national identity. Today, no one knows that we had a black president and that president was Vicente Guerrero. No one knows that a black man established the first free town in the Americas called San Lorenzo de los Negros in Veracruz. Many people don’t know that José Maria Morelos and Emiliano Zapata were Afro-descended.  

The removal of Afro-descended ancestry from historical texts and images of prominent national figures further displaces blackness.

35 Tómas Ortiz, (school director and community activist) in discussion with the author, June 28, 2013.

36 The whitening of national heroes is a trend throughout Latin America. Historical figures such as Antonio Maseo in Cuba and Juan Pablo Duarte in the Dominican Republic are memorialized in monuments and historical texts, none of which reflect their African heritage.
from Mexican identity and validates contentions that it is not possible to be both black and Mexican. It also explains why after the Mexican Revolution, values and traditions that these heroes represent, such as valor, national pride, and resistance against foreign imposition are embedded in national identity construction, but there is no identification with blackness. Legal recognition of Afro-descended Mexicans as an ethnic group will provide a formal space for them to advocate for their inclusion in the nation’s historical record and challenge the government to live up to its contention that Mexico is a multicultural society.

While resistance and rebellion are significant aspects of Mexican identity that are ingrained in the nation’s character from the Independence Era to the present, similar to the de-Africanization of particular historical figures, this defining feature of Mexican tradition has also been removed from its connection to Afro-Mexican history. As argued by Ben Vinson, some historical texts, including those by Mexican anthropologist Alfonso Toro continued to discuss the Afro-descended population as part of Mexican society although it had been formally erased during the 1920s. Vinson contends that Alfonso Toro’s analysis suggests that “in order to better understand the temperament of the Mexican citizenry, one needed a better grasp of the long-
term contributions of Afro-Mexicans."  

Toro’s recognition of Afro-Mexicans affirms their identity and value as citizens and diminishes arguments that biological, social, and cultural mixing eliminated the presence of a distinct Afro-descended population. More importantly, Toro explicitly locates them within post-revolutionary constructions of Mexicanidad and refutes existing perspectives that center the mestizo as representative of Mexican identity. Vinson also highlights Toro’s emphasis on slave rebellion and resistance during the colonial period, arguing that “Mexican people’s propensity for revolt, which had been witnessed during the Mexican Revolution, the struggle for independence, and the tumultuous nineteenth century, could be partly attributed to the nation’s Afro-Mexican heritage.”  

This implication is significant because it challenges notions that Mexico’s legacy of resistance is solely rooted in indigenous or mestizo culture. As will be examined further in the chapter, there is an extricable link between current perceptions of identity, citizenship, and social value

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and the distribution of socioeconomic and political resources, both of which are influenced by how history is remembered.

Jamie Flores also views the removal of blackness from historical memory as problematic to the process of forging a collective national identity. Limiting national history to solely discuss the amalgamation of Spanish and indigenous cultures presents challenges to advocating for formal recognition by the government, acknowledgement of citizenship from Mexicans outside of Afro-descended communities, and broad awareness of their own history among Afro-descended people themselves. Consequently, the historical presence of Afro-Mexicans is not diminished, but completely omitted:

This is the issue, the forgotten history. The forgotten historical factors, such as the war for independence and the revolutionary war in which black towns participated, but it’s not mentioned. It’s not said that José Maria Morelos was Afro-descended, it’s said that he was moreno, which is a term associated with dark skin. However, in the most recent distribution of the fifty dollar bill, Morelos’ image is whitened, with few Afro-descended characteristics. There’s no initiative to promote awareness that Afro-descended people participate in improving Mexico and are not foreigners. For example, Prince Yanga who fought in Veracruz. This is something we should learn about in primary school, but it’s not taught. It’s only taught that blacks arrived as slaves during the colonial period. There’s no discussion that blacks exist in Mexico presently and live in towns that are seeking recognition and collective rights in the federal constitution. How is the rest of the country going to know about the Afro-descended presence if it’s not taught in schools and historical figures are not recognized as Afro-Mexican? It will help Afro-Mexican towns gain national recognition if it’s known
that these historical figures that fought for independence are Afro-descended. 40

Afro-Mexicans are not represented as having social value, and are thus perceived not only as foreigners, but also not relevant to the nation. However, the teaching of histories, such as Gaspar Yanga establishing the first free black town in the Americas in 1619, is not only central to Afro-Mexicans learning who they are and gaining acceptance in Mexican society, but also crucial to the entire nation knowing the complete history of Mexico.41 Alfonso Toro’s contention that Mexico’s rebellious spirit against oppression is connected with slave resistance among Afro-descended people has resonance because it directly associates ideals such as freedom, liberty, and justice with Afro-Mexicans. This particular detail becoming part of the mainstream historical narrative help will deconstruct prevailing definitions of Mexicanidad and assisting in solidifying Afro-descended people’s place in society.

Mr. Flores’s response to my question of why the government is not interested in supporting black towns further confirms

40 Jaime Flores, (organization president and teacher) in discussion with the author, June 29, 2013.

that historical memory currently influences how the government distributes resources and the general societal perception of marginalized groups:

A day or two ago it was signed that black towns are not a priority for the government like indigenous towns because they symbolize the fight, such as the armed conflict in Chiapas and the first president [Vicente Guerrero] was indigenous, so the government wants to advance indigenous towns.  

Thus, the history of Afro-Mexican towns being undocumented and excluded from traditional narratives has real consequences that present challenges to socioeconomic development, recognition of citizenship, and protection of civil rights. These larger issues are why it is necessary for Afro-descended people to have the ability to identify as Afro-descended, Afro-Mexican, or within another specific category in the federal census.

“*No Hay Negros Aqui*”: Contesting Afro-descended People’s Citizenship through Underdevelopment and Public Scrutiny

According to historian George Reid Andrews, it is common for historical social and economic institutions to have continuing resonance among Afro-descended populations throughout Latin America. He argues, that “As citizens of present-day Afro-Latin America struggle to escape the economic heritage of

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42 Jaime Flores, (organization president and teacher) in discussion with the author, June 29, 2013.
poverty and dependency left by plantation agriculture, they do so under the shadow of the social heritage of racial and class inequality left by slavery.”

This synthesis of factors that play a role shaping Afro-descended people’s reality in Latin America conveys that social rejection of blackness is not limited to Mexico. While broad comparisons can be made with Latin America, what distinguishes Mexico from other countries is it has yet to offer formal recognition to its Afro-descended citizens. The exclusion of blackness from Mexican national identity has not only resulted in blackness being labeled as foreign, but also in adverse reactions toward Afro-descended Mexicans in the public sphere. Because Afro-Mexicans never migrated to major cities in large numbers, the majority of them remain in their communities isolated and unknown to the rest of Mexican society. The isolation of Afro-descended communities, a lack of their presence in the historical record, and assertions that Mexicans are mestizo account for the common statement “No hay negros aquí”, “There are no blacks here.” Statements such as these contribute to Afro-Mexicans’ citizenship being contested when they travel outside of the Costa Chica region and into large cities.

My conversation with Tomás Ortiz, show that Afro-Mexicans’ mobility is physically limited by other people’s ignorance about their existence:

When a town isn’t recognized politically, it’s a town that doesn’t exist, is invisible, and has no guarantee of basic rights. No black town speaks a native language, so they’re excluded from these programs. Another cause of non-recognition is that people from black towns are not able to travel freely throughout the country. All Mexican citizens are free to travel, but when blacks are required to provide proof of citizenship, their rights are violated. There’s no discrimination here; the discrimination happens when people leave the region because blacks are unknown in Mexico.  

This example of how Afro-Mexicans are impacted by discrimination refutes popular narratives that contend Mexico is a racial utopia and discrimination does not exist, “porque somos mexicanos” because we are all Mexican. The first-hand account also indicates that when confronted with race, or blackness in particular, notions that Mexicans are either European, indigenous, or mestizo impact public response to individuals who do not visibly fit within these categories. Challenging one’s citizenship because they are black gives the impression that blackness does not belong in Mexico, is unwelcomed, and does not require the same respect or privileges as other socially acceptable labels of Mexican identity. While it may seem  

44 Tómas Ortiz, (school director and community activist) in discussion with the author, June 28, 2013.
unimportant to have one’s citizenship questioned, it cannot be dismissed if the questioning is coming from law enforcement. The lack of information about Afro-Mexicans available to the general public causes law enforcement officials to assume that they are immigrants and request to see documents that authorize them to be in the country. Unfortunately, these incidents are frequent and humiliating for Afro-Mexicans and result in severe civil rights violations when they travel outside of their communities.

For most Mexicans, perception is reality in that their limited to non-existent contact with Afro-descended people in their daily lives, whether in person or through media outlets, means that black people are not a part of Mexican society. It is further challenging to have a meaningful discussion about racial discrimination if the United States is commonly used as a measuring stick for unresolved racial tensions. In general, most Mexicans may not feel Afro-descended people are relevant to Mexican culture because it is not engaged in national discourse. Thus the discrimination Afro-Mexicans experience is equally influenced by explicit resistance and ignorance. Jaime Flores explains why it is said in national discourse that there are no blacks in Mexico and that discrimination does not exist:

The national discourse has whitened the presence of Afro-Mexican towns for a long time. The stereotype is that if
you not white, light brown, or indigenous, then you’re not Mexican. Many people in Latin America think when you speak of discrimination in Mexico you’re only referring to indigenous towns, but it’s not true. For example, this week we’re going to an event that discusses the United Nation’s efforts against all forms of discrimination. It’s necessary to talk about discrimination because it’s said that it doesn’t exist in Mexico, only discrimination against indigenous towns. But indigenous people aren’t the only ones who are discriminated against; it’s also Afro-Mexicans. They say that racism doesn’t exist in Mexico.45

Certain standards exist within Mexican society that define who is considered Mexican and limit conversations about racial discrimination to how it affects the indigenous population. Because it is perceived that discrimination does not apply to Afro-Mexicans, they have no means to advocate for themselves when they experience discrimination, and thus are further made invisible. Moreover, Afro-Mexicans are forced to accept the inferior social status with which they have been labeled when they have these negative encounters and their civil rights as Mexican citizens and as human beings are not protected.

Although indigenous groups are also victims of racism and inequality, federal and state policies condemning discrimination against this population raises awareness about this issue and validates their humanity. It also solidifies that racism and discrimination is not imagined and enables indigenous peoples to define particular ways in which they are marginalized. Afro-

45 Jaime Flores, (organization president and teacher) in discussion with the author, June 29, 2013.
Mexicans are unable to do the same because their presence is not documented, and thus, inequality toward them cannot be considered discriminatory or racist. Ultimately, constructions of national identity privilege whiteness and brownness, tolerate indigeneity, and reject blackness.

The process of how discrimination against Afro-Mexicans is perpetuated without them having a legal status or any type of presence in the national sphere is complex, as it is influenced by federal and state institutions, historical and existing social constructions of racial and national identity, and situational circumstances. Consequently, Afro-Mexicans are susceptible to discrimination on various levels, including social, economic, political, and gender, but formally defining how these inequalities are experienced is a substantial challenge. However, according to sociologist Mara Loveman, racial discrimination against Afro-descended people can persist in Latin American countries in which they are formally recognized in the national census. Loveman poses a comprehensive definition that explains how this is possible and its implications for racial identity construction. She argues:

Official ethnoracial classification can make ethnoracial distinctions matter indirectly and diffusely, through a range of symbolic and political practices that fall short of legally institutionalized racial domination but nonetheless contribute to making ethnoracial boundaries a
social reality, with attendant ‘socially real’ consequences.\textsuperscript{46}

While there are no formal laws that limit their physical, social, economic, or political mobility, the government’s failure to acknowledge that racism against Afro-Mexicans is an issue perpetuates the problem. Furthermore, by denying this issue, the government inadvertently creates an environment that is resistant and in some cases hostile toward Afro-Mexicans. For example, in describing an incident of discrimination his friends encountered, Jaime Flores states: “My two friends from Guerrero that traveled to Oaxaca City were harassed by the police and forced to show identification, and taxi drivers would pass them when they tried to get a ride. On one occasion, my friend was told by a taxi driver, ‘You’re not from Oaxaca and you’re not Mexican.’”

**Will 2020 Be the Year? Progress Toward Recognition in the Census and Establishing an Afro-descended Category**

The Afro-descended grassroots social movement in the Costa Chica has been instrumental in bringing attention to how this population navigates race and national identity in a country that claims they do not exist, and marginalizes them in a historical and contemporary context. The most important aspect

of the grassroots movement is the exercise of agency to advocate for their families and communities despite not having access to the same resources that are afforded to people who identity and are perceived as mestizo. The persistent efforts of organizers, residents, and scholars since the 1990s have resulted in considerable advancements in gaining visibility for Afro-Mexicans and establishing a defined space in Mexican society.

While it is not certain that the inclusion of an Afro-descended or black category in the 2020 census will guarantee equality and end discrimination, recognition in the census is imperative to quantifying the size of the population. INGEI, the agency that conducts the federal census, has yet to confirm if a category will be included in the 2020 census. However, it has committed to conducting an informal census poll in 2015 that will serve as a preliminary test for the actual census. Results from the poll will provide insight as to how many people would identify as Afro-descended or Afro-Mexican if such category is included in the census. More importantly, the poll will provide an unofficial count of the entire Afro-Mexican population, which does not exist in any other document. The INEGI has also collaborated with grassroots organizations in Oaxaca to collect data for the publication of a document that provides demographic information related to education, employment, birth rates, literacy, and other socioeconomic concerns that impact Afro-
Mexican communities. This document is titled *Sociodemographic Profile of Afro-Mexican Towns in Oaxaca* and is currently the only comprehensive source on demographic data for Afro-Mexicans in the state. Interest from a government supported entity is significant because it assists in refuting the invisibility of Afro-Mexicans and reinserting them into the larger society. Institutional support in promoting recognition of Afro-Mexican communities is also being extended by other agencies that work with state and federal governments.

In 2013, the Oaxaca State Secretary of Indian Affairs published a document, titled *Principles and Criteria for the Legal, Constitutional Amendment of Rights for Indigenous and Afro-Mexican Peoples in Oaxaca*. This document outlines the outcomes of ongoing meetings between representatives from this organization as well as other state institutions, activists, and residents from indigenous and Afro-Mexican communities. These meetings began in 2012 with the intention to discuss social, economic, and political concerns that affect both populations. The objective of the document is to “consult, meet and collect the ideas, views and proposals of indigenous and Afro-Mexican people, and the general public on the principles, criteria and content for the realization of a constitutional and legal reform related to the rights of indigenous peoples and Afro-Mexicans in
The document also specifically addresses the necessity for Afro-Mexican towns to be formally recognized and have protected rights that the government has extended to indigenous peoples. Collaboration from government-endorsed agencies indicates promise that constructions of Mexicanidad are slowly being expanded to include voices from historically marginalized groups and are more representative of the nation’s diverse racial and cultural mosaic.

Conclusions

Afro-Mexicans have continuously struggled for social, economic, and political equality for themselves as well as their fellow citizens from the Independence Era to the present. The process of erasing their historical presence that began shortly after the abolition of slavery in 1829 and was fortified during the early twentieth century, promotes a particular vision of Mexicanidad that elevates the mestizo. While significant efforts are being made by non-governmental and governmental agencies to collaborate with Afro-Mexican communities, the extent to which socioeconomic underdevelopment and political marginalization can be rectified solely by federal recognition

47 Secretaría de Asuntos Indígenas, Principios y Criterios para la Reforma Constitucional, Legal e Institucional sobre los Derechos de los Pueblos Indígenas y Negro Afrómexicano de Oaxaca. (Oaxaca de Juárez, Oaxaca, Mexico), February 2013, 12.
in the 2020 census is questionable. Re-inserting Afro-Mexicans into Mexican public imagination, history, and culture will be an ongoing task that can be facilitated by the addition of a census category.

The ability to quantify the Afro-Mexican population, locate areas in which they reside, and identify other sociodemographic information will promote national discussion related to social and cultural diversity. Afro-Mexicans’ must be completely integrated into Mexican society, which includes incorporating their history in the national educational curriculum, visibility in historical monuments and institutions, and federally sponsored education promotes to combat racial and ethnic discrimination. While these steps are necessary to solidifying Afro-Mexicans’ integration into the larger society, the primary challenge is to create a constitutional amendment recognizing Afro-Mexican’s civil rights. Current federal and state amendments addressing discrimination are insufficient because they are not specific to race. Such an amendment will provide legal protection against civil rights violations and ensure permanent, legal recognition of Afro-Mexicans.

Reconstructing the social, economic, and political significance of Mexicanidad is an ongoing process that will challenge citizens and institutions to reconsider their
perspectives of race and national identity and its influence in shaping Mexican society. As the likelihood of federal recognition of Afro-Mexicans increases, it will become more difficult for people in the larger society to claim that black people do not exist and ignore the reality that Mexico is not the inclusive, mono-cultural nation that is represented in national discourse. Once Afro-Mexicans are no longer invisible, the true character of Mexico will be revealed in how others respond to the idea of black people as Mexican citizens.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION- LOCATING BLACKNESS IN MEXICO: SOLIDIFYING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN RESEARCH, SCHOLARSHIP AND ACTIVISM

Perspective for Negro writers will come when they have looked and brooded so hard and long upon the harsh lot of their race and compared it with the hopes and struggles of minority peoples everywhere that the cold facts have begun to tell them something.

-Richard Wright, *Blueprint for Negro Writing*, 1937

A Growing Field of Research

Since the publication of Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran’s *La Población Negra de México* in 1946, Afro-Mexican Studies has evolved into a formidable research field, gaining international attention for its scholarship, relationships with community organizations, and overall efforts to reinsert Afro-descended people into Mexico’s historical past and locate them in the present. Scholars from the United States, such as Herman Bennett, Ben Vinson III, and Laura A. Lewis have been instrumental in this process as well as Mexican scholars, such as María Elisa Velásquez, Luz María Montiel Martínez, and Sagrario Cruz Carretero. Research produced by these and other academics has resulted in manuscripts, edited volumes, conferences, colloquiums, and symposiums that have influenced younger scholars such as myself and generated broader dialogues.
concerning Black and Latino race relations in the United States and abroad. More importantly, the increasing number of investigations is bringing awareness to Afro-descended people’s socioeconomic and political struggles throughout Latin America. The specific impact this is having in regards to Afro-descended people in Mexico is creating opportunities to establish international networks between scholars, activist organizations, and other people who are interested in learning more about Afro-Mexicans. Increased awareness of the Afro-descended presence in Mexico assists in promoting their visibility and dismantling myths associated with mestizaje; it also provides international support for federal recognition in the 2020 census. While Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán established the foundation for research on Afro-Mexicans, it is because of the combined efforts of current scholars and community activists that the terms Afro-Mexican or Afro-descended Mexican are becoming more recognizable outside of academia.

**In the Public Eye: Increasing Afro-descended Mexicans’ Visibility**

As mentioned in chapter two, the 2010 PBS documentary series *Black in Latin America* profiles Afro-descended people’s historical and ongoing struggle for acceptance in Mexican society in the episode titled, “The Black Grandma in the
"Closet". Despite the episode’s brevity in explaining complex issues related to race, class, citizenship, and access to resources, its primary strength is that it makes the information accessible to a non-academic audience. While the intention is to present an introductory analysis of these issues, some scholars question the information’s authenticity and view the episode on Mexico as an example of how “culture workers focus on no longer locally significant traditions.”

Laura A. Lewis argues misinterpretation occurs because outsiders “exoticize blackness, displace it, distance it, focus on it, and turn it into an object of consumption for the curious.” Whereas Lewis is correct in emphasizing the importance of understanding local meanings of race, culture, and ethnicity, it is also essential to package information in a way that is accessible to the intended audience. The objective of the series is to synthesize the historical and continued marginalization of Afro-descended people in Latin America and promote public interest surrounding


2 Lewis defines culture workers as foreign academics or activists who do not consider the significance of local constructions of culture, race, and ethnicity to understand how these concepts provide meaning in Afro-Mexican communities. She mentions that she was contacted by a producer for the Black in Latin America series and questioned about physical examples of African cultural retention in San Nicolás, Guerrero. This is what she identifies as a cultural tradition that does not adequately represent the local community.

3 Laura A. Lewis, Chocolate and Corn Flour, 153.
this issue. Though there are some gaps in the scope of the information presented, the film is a useful teaching tool and fulfills its purpose of encouraging further inquiry into Afro-descended people in Latin America.

Blackness in Mexico also received public attention in the October 2014 New York Times article, “Negro? Prieto? Moreno? A Question of Identity for Black Mexicans”. The author, Randal C. Archibold, explores the hidden legacy of Afro-descended people and particular aspects of their culture that connect them to the African Diaspora. More importantly, the article examines the erasure of blackness from Mexican history such as the whitening of national hero José Maria Morelos, complexities in gaining cultural, political, and socioeconomic recognition, and an overall preference to label Mexico as a nation of mixed indigenous and European population. While there is clear indication that whiteness and race mixture are socially and culturally valued, Archibold contends that indigenous people are also considered outside of this social preference. However, “although Mexico’s indigenous peoples persistently rank at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder, the country takes pride in its indigenous heritage and carefully preserves the remnants of ancient civilizations.” Thus, the practice of indigenous
inclusion/black exclusion is apparent in the discussion of why Afro-Mexicans experience socioeconomic and political marginalization.

Coverage in a mainstream media outlet such as the New York Times is significant because the majority of people outside of academia are not familiar with the term Afro-Mexican nor do they associate blackness with Mexico. More publicity in media outlets in Mexico and abroad advances objectives to reinsert Afro-descended Mexicans into national discourse and educate the public about their culture, history, and communities, making it more difficult for their struggle to be ignored. Increased publicity is also an indication that the grassroots social movement is gaining momentum within Mexico, which offers encouragement that people will become more receptive to racial and ethnic diversity.

Further indication that the discussion about race in Latin America, particularly as it pertains to Afro-descended people, is no longer limited to academic settings is evident in social media. Facebook has been an important outlet for these conversations. It connects scholars, activists, and common

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citizens from all over the world, creating a dialogue about how to pursue visibility, access to resources, and a new definition of blackness in their respective societies. Facebook is also utilized to promote current research, community gatherings, and films about Afro-descended people in Latin America. My research has benefitted greatly from access to new source materials and informative discussions with people in various Latin American countries via Facebook. One of these source materials is the documentary film, *Afro-Latinos: The Untaught Story.* This series traces the history, religious practices, music and dance, food, and identity of Afro-descended people in Mexico, Brazil, Haiti, Panama, and other Latin American countries. The objective is to challenge existing conceptions of Latino identity in the region as well as the United States that contend Latinos are the descendants of indigenous people and European settlers. The series emphasizes the omission of African slavery from this romanticized narrative as well as unequal power dynamics influenced by race, class, and gender. The film also encourages audiences to take an active role in educating themselves and others in their communities about these issues and donating resources such as computers, clothing, and books to help Afro-descended communities empower themselves.

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Afro-Latino identity and culture is central to defining the historical and current status of Latin American societies and more Latinos, as well as people of other backgrounds, should be informed about this legacy. The growing number of documentaries about Afro-Latinos in general and Afro-descended Mexicans in particular assists in deconstructing narratives that negate blackness as well as providing a visual representation for Afro-descended communities in Latin America.

I was also introduced to the film, *Negro: A docu-series about Latino Identity* through Facebook. The film “explores identity, colonization, racism, and the African Diaspora in Latin America”, with particular emphasis on colorism in the Latino community. The film also draws connections between the historical impacts of these concepts and how they manifest in a contemporary setting. The primary strength of the film is that it features personal stories from Afro-Latinos in the United States and across Latin America as well as commentary from scholars. Similar to other documentaries, *Negro* conveys that blackness is diminished in Latino culture and replaced with an emphasis on biological and cultural mixing that explains the color hierarchy that exists within many Latino families and

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influences attitudes toward beauty, preferences for marriage partners, and opportunities of social and economic advancement. Overall, the development of visual resources discussing Afro-Latino identity offers additional teaching tools to educate students and other interested in this topic.

**Current Projects and Future Research Goals**

As discussed in chapter one, my personal story as a native of San Antonio, Texas who grew up in a predominately Mexican-American environment, gives me a unique perspective of the African Diaspora in Latin America. To facilitate awareness about Afro-descended people in Mexico and broader historical and contemporary connections between Black and Latino culture, I developed a course on Afro-Mexican History at the University of Texas at San Antonio, (UTSA). I taught this course in the spring of 2015 in the African-American Studies Program. The course was also cross-listed with Mexican American Studies and had a total enrollment of ten students. This scope of the course analyzed Afro-Mexican History during the colonial, independence, revolutionary and post-revolutionary periods. Particular consideration was given to constructions of race, citizenship, and gender with the objective of understanding how Afro-Mexicans have contributed to the social, economic, and political fabric of Mexico. The course also discussed Afro-
Mexican history in context with other Afro-descended populations throughout Latin America to examine broader socioeconomic impacts of race, citizenship, and gender in the region. My intention was for students to understand connections between the African Diaspora and Latin America. By the end of the semester, students were able to answer the following questions:

1. What are the historical constructions of race, citizenship, and gender in Mexico?
2. How have these constructions changed over time?
3. How have Afro-Mexicans been impacted by these constructions?
4. In what ways have Afro-Mexicans demonstrated agency in shaping Mexican society? What is the current socioeconomic and political status of Afro-Mexicans as a population?
5. How can this information be used to make connections between the African Diaspora and Latin America?

Teaching this course in this particular space was especially meaningful not only because of my personal connection to the research, but also because it facilitated discussion about Black and Latino race relations in the United States. Students recognized the overall negation of blackness in Latino culture, and that relations between the African-American and Mexican American communities in San Antonio are contentious. They also
relayed that learning about Afro-Mexicans could assist in establishing more amicable relations and creating coalitions between the two groups. Student interest in the course suggests that there is a demand for more complete narratives of Mexican history that engage marginalized populations and challenge traditional historical discourses.

UTSA also has other scholars committed to promoting education about Afro-Mexicans and the history of social and cultural exchange between African American and Mexican American communities in San Antonio. In accordance with this objective, Dr. Marco A. Cervantes organized an event, titled “Black and Brown Sounds in SA: Cultural Afromestizaje Roundtable and Concert”. The event was held at the UTSA Downtown campus on June 18, 2014 and featured myself, former councilman Mario Salas, and other graduate students and community members personally invested in Afro-Mexican research or in improving relations between African Americans and Mexican Americans. The event highlighted the historical erasure of blackness from Mexican history and its current impact on Afro-Mexicans, and existing strategies to build cultural and social understanding of Black/Mexican culture. Because neither of these histories is taught, it is commonplace to assume that African Americans and Mexican Americans have no social or cultural similarities.
Future Projects and Collaborations

In an effort to increase knowledge about Afro-Mexican and Black/Mexican cultural connections, I intend to organize community and research projects that will advance public awareness about these issues as well as my broader research agenda of analyzing twentieth and twenty-first century racial and national identity constructions. One of these projects is an art exhibit featuring Afro-Mexican artists from the Costa Chica. While in Oaxaca City in July 2014, I was introduced to Shinzaburo Takeda, a Japanese artist who has been collaborating with local artists from the Costa Chica for thirty years. Mr. Takeda assists with educating people about Afro-Mexican culture by providing outlets for artists to showcase and sell their work. Proceeds go to benefit Afro-descended communities and further cultural education efforts. I intend to collaborate with academic and community institutions in San Antonio to feature an exhibit of Afro-Mexican art from the Costa Chica at the Institute of Texan Cultures or the George Washington Carver Community Cultural Center. The objective of the exhibit will be to inform the public about the significance of Afro-Mexican culture and why it is not included in larger discussions of Mexican history, tradition, and culture. Additionally, I would like to organize an exhibit displaying photographs of people in
Afro-Mexican communities taken by Tony Gleaton. Mr. Gleaton has been photographing these communities for over twenty years and his work has been featured in *Ebony* magazine as well as an exhibit at the Smithsonian, titled *Africa’s Legacy in Mexico*. The exhibit will provide a rare opportunity for people unfamiliar with Afro-descended populations in Latin America and Mexico in particular to view how Afro-Mexicans interact with their families and communities, practice cultural traditions, and confront issues of racial and national identity. Displaying art and photographs representative of Afro-Mexican culture is important to increasing their visibility and expressing social and cultural agency.

In addition to educating people within the community and in academic settings, I would like to develop an academic course that combines classroom education with service learning. The course will prepare students for a semester study abroad in Oaxaca, Mexico, during which time they will learn about Afro-Mexican History and the present socioeconomic status of Afro-descended communities. The second part of the course will consist of language study in an intensive program in Oaxaca so that students will be able to communicate with residents in the Costa Chica. The most significant aspect of the course is the service learning component, in which students will collaborate
with residents in an Afro-Mexican community to organize a community service project. Possible ideas for project are a community food bank, oral history preservation, and literacy program. Service learning is central to students applying what they learned and gaining on-the-ground experience in grassroots organization and project management. I have been in contact with faculty members in the Political Science Department at the University of the District of Columbia to develop this course. In July 2014 we made an exploratory visit to Oaxaca City and the Costa Chica to discuss interest in a service learning project with local community members. Residents, school directors, and politicians were open to developing a student and community led project, the details of which are currently a work in progress. The implementation of a service learning project will assist in accomplishing my goal of connecting scholarship with activism and socioeconomic and political advocacy.

My next research endeavor will be an oral history project that engages the legacy of race, national identity, and citizenship during and after the Mexican Revolution (1910-1960) in Morelos, Oaxaca. This particular history will be explored to analyze the broader discourse of race and national identity in Mexico. Morelos is an ideal space to begin this direction of research because of its history as an Afro-descended town
established by escaped slaves in the seventeenth century who lived independently from Spanish rule. While in the past, its geographic location in the Pacific Coast of Oaxaca, surrounded by mountains, hills, and foliage provided protection from outsiders, it now isolates them from what is considered the dominant society, and along with discrimination, furthers their marginalization. One of the primary reasons for Afro-descended peoples’ second-class status is due to their erasure from national historical narratives as well as an overall denial of their continued existence. Afro-descended peoples’ invisibility became solidified after 1921 when race was removed from the federal census because it conflicted with mestizaje, which promotes social, cultural, and biological amalgamation into the mestizo category.

In this particular social climate that reinforces Afro-descended peoples’ marginalization, it is essential that the history of their contributions to shaping Mexican society be told, specifically as it relates to the Revolution, which is memorialized in national culture as a defining moment that created a democratic, inclusive, and united society. However, the role of Afro-descended towns such as Morelos is omitted from the national narrative of the Revolution. For example, residents in Morelos fought in Emiliano Zapata’s army during the
Revolution to gain communal land rights and economic freedom from plantation owners. Similar to the history of the town’s establishment, Morelos’ participation in the revolutionary war is undocumented and passed on through oral storytelling. Although oral tradition is a central part of culture, its significance is dwindling among younger generations because according to elders, they are not interested in learning their history and do not understand why it is relevant. Thus it is imperative for this history to be documented to preserve the culture and challenge existing notions that exclude blackness from discussions about the Revolution.

Research questions will examine why and in what capacity residents from Morelos participated in the war, what was gained as a result of their participation, and compare these findings with the popular national narrative of the revolution. Are there divergences between these narratives and how are these divergences explained? Why is Afro-descended people’s participation in the war important? These questions and others will be approached through qualitative research methods, such as archival documents and personal interviews with residents in Morelos. Interviews will be central to providing a local perspective of race, national identity, and citizenship as well as detailing how Morelos was impacted by the Revolution. I have
established relationships with local storytellers during previous research trips and have identified others who are knowledgeable about local history. Thus, the only criteria for selecting interviewees will be their ability to relay the information. State and federal archival documents will also assist in contextualizing residents’ personal narratives and offer an institutional perspective of this particular historical moment. These documents are available at the Agencia General de la Nación in Mexico City and the Archivo General del Estado de Oaxaca in Oaxaca City. Considering that this history is undocumented, it may not be possible to access archival documents on a local level. The project will also engage prominent post-revolutionary theories addressing race, citizenship, nationalism, and collective identity, such as mestizaje and indigenismo as discussed by José Vasconcelos, Manuel Gamio, and Octavio Paz. The objective is to de-center the mestizo as the dominant racial image and further discussions related to multiculturalism in Mexico and promote visibility and equality for Afro-descended people.

I would also like to further investigate the socioeconomic significance of gender dynamics within Afro-Mexican communities and its impact on women. The more time I spend in Morelos and other similar towns, the more it becomes apparent that there are different expectations of women than there are for men in terms
of education, employment, and family responsibilities. While the same can be said for broader constructions of gender throughout Mexico, Afro-Mexican women’s experience demands particular analysis given that their marginalization is influenced by race, gender, and class. This project is especially important considering that the majority of my most intimate interactions were with women. A common theme I gathered from these interactions was that Afro-Mexican women’s voices are not always heard, certainly not by the government and other institutions, but also within their own communities. This became clearer as I observed community meetings discussing formal recognition, pervasive socioeconomic underdevelopment, and other substantial issues. While women were well represented in these spaces, men tended to dominate the discussion. Undertaking a research project that specifically engages Afro-Mexican women’s experience in their respective communities will provide insight into how race, gender, and class intersect and how Afro-Mexican women navigate these issues.

The primary value of my research agenda is that it broadens perspectives on the human experience, encourages reflection on how racism and inequality impacts people’s lives, and raises questions concerning how these issues should be approached. The research is particularly valuable to Afro-descended populations throughout Latin America in that it assists in promoting
awareness of struggles for national recognition as an ethnic group and human rights. Overall, my research agenda is important to the larger scholarly community because it emphasizes the necessity of reconstructing social, cultural, and political meanings of blackness to understand Afro-descended people’s reality.
APPENDIX A

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES

This section contains biographical information for people who were interviewed. Some interviews were not discussed in the dissertation, but are included in this section. Names have been changed to protect the privacy of each individual, unless otherwise noted. All information is current as of 2015.

José Alonzo is a resident of Huazolochitlán, Oaxaca and is actively involved in Veronica Gutierrez’s campaign for political office.

Blanca De Leon is forty-two years old and lives in Morelos. She is a single parent of one child and owns a small business in Morelos. Ms. De Leon also helps care for her elderly parents who live nearby.

Jaime Flores is thirty years old and teaches in a secondary school. He is also president of an organization that advocates on behalf of Afro-Mexican towns. Mr. Flores is a native of Morelos and lives with his parents, wife, and three daughters.

Roberto Garza is a seventy-five year old farmer and lives in Morelos.

Veronica Gutierrez is a primary school director and lives in Huazolochitlán, Oaxaca. At the time of the interview, Ms. Gutierrez was a candidate for political office and was later elected to municipal office.

Father Glynn Jemmott (not a pseudonym) is a Catholic priest, originally from Trinidad. Father Glynn has been working in Afro-Mexican communities for over thirty years. He returned to Trinidad after living in Cireulo, Oaxaca for over twenty years.

Armando Lopez is seventy-two years old and lives in Morelos with his wife. Mr. Lopez is also a farmer.

Danyella Lopez is forty years old and lives in Morelos, Oaxaca with her three children and elderly mother. She is a single parent and works as a primary school teacher.

Tómas Ortiz is director of a primary school in Morelos, Oaxaca. He is also engaged promoting rights for Afro-Mexican towns and collaborates with state and federal institutions to promote
these issues. Mr. Ortiz lives in Morelos with his wife and youngest child.

Dr. Javier Peña is a physician in Morelos.

Esmerelda Sanchez is a fifty year old housewife and native of Morelos. She lives with her husband and helps care for her grandchildren. Ms. Sanchez also runs a meat market from her home and assists in the care of other extended family.

Luis Sanchez lives in Huazolochitlán and works on Veronica Guiterrez’s campaign.
Juan Torres is a seventy-four year old farmer who lives with his wife and grandchildren in Morelos. Mr. Torres is a born and raised in the town.

Carlos Vasquez is a resident of Morelos and earns a living by working on a farm. He is fifty-two years old and lives with his wife.
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Below are interview questions that participants were asked.

General Interview Questions

1. What is the history of Morelos?
2. What is your ethnic identification? Why do you identify this way?
3. Do you think there is a difference between the terms moreno and negro? If so, what is the difference?
4. What does it mean to be moreno/negro in Morelos?
5. What are the roles of men involved in the Afro-descendant social movement in Morelos?
6. What are the roles of women involved in the Afro descendant social movement?
7. What is the quality and quantity of women’s participation in the movement?
8. What influences women’s participation in the movement?
9. What issues are most important to you as a woman that are impacted by exclusion by the government?
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