INTRODUCTION

1. Postcolonial imperative of Black[1] identity

Trailing the eternally mobile discussion about race and ethnicity in the Americas is reminiscent of a labyrinth. Identity formations, which typically depend on the classifications of race and ethnicity, are complex processes that must consider the self-perception of the individual in addition to how the society at large reciprocates, determines, and influences upon them. In other words, the self-identification process is an interdependent relationship between the person's public identity and their subjectivity. Neither does the individual's public identity nor their subjectivity dominate, nor are they autonomous processes in the sense that an individual is separately affected by each without either process having an influential impact on the other in determining the outcome of the individual's identity. Indeed, it is essential to locate the production of identity amid the interaction of these factors, a production that is continuous and never static, linear, or simple.

Within the discipline of International Relations (IR), the constructivist approach has carved a pathway amid the neorealist-neoliberal debate to pinpoint for greater analysis influencing factors like identity and culture that have been allocated

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[1] I choose to capitalise both 'Black' and 'White' (and all concerned derivatives) in this thesis so as not to show a preference for either racial and/or ethnic category, in addition to rejecting the presumed logic that subsumed Whiteness as a racial category as if it were organic to the world's natural order. After all, an overall aim of the thesis is to provide level playing ground for persons of African ancestry faced with the debilitating effects of having had to exist under White supremacy for centuries. Likewise, 'Other' will be capitalised when used in reference to the resistance projects of non-White peoples, primarily the Black person, in their struggles to achieve subject status as well as escape the suffocating binarisms that racially classify them as non-entities.

zero-relevance by the traditional conception.[2] All too often, IR has become myopically preoccupied with the macro dimensions of the studies at the very expense of, ironically, forsaking or conveniently glossing over the human element.[3] Precisely when this occurs, the voice of the marginalised is utterly stifled because the oppressed, by definition, have limited access to the material factors that traditional IR dictates as the very stuff of international politics; hence, no money no power, given that power is defined purely in terms of the physical and material.[4] Thankfully, the constructivist approach to IR – and in parallel manner the postcolonial critiques in literary studies[5] – has sanctioned analyses that resituate the marginalised in rescuing them from theoretical non-existence. Given this reconstitution provoked by challenges to what is deemed worthy study within the discipline, the suppression of the Black voice in Mexico is the thematic backdrop to be accentuated in this thesis.

Marysia Zalewski and Cynthia Enloe, notable feminist theorists in the field, very concisely stress why identity has great implications for both the internal

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[2] R. B. J. Walker is one of the prominent theorists who propound the centrality of culture and identity to International Relations, advocating that the discipline must begin to more critically engage these subjective realms along with Ali Alamin Mazrui, Peter Worsley, and Raymond Williams, among others. For an introduction to the cultural critique of IR, see Albert J. Paolini, *Navigating Modernity: Postcolonialism, Identity, and International Relations*, eds. Anthony Elliot and Anthony Moran (Boulder, Colorado and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999).

[3] For example, see J. Ann Tickner's critique of Hans Morgenthau in formulating a feminist epistemology of International Relations that propounds this sort of humanist thinking. J. Ann Tickner, "Hans Morgenthau's Principles of Political Realism: A Feminist Reformulation," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 17, no. 3 (Winter 1988): 429–40.

[4] See Alexander Wendt, "'Ideas All the Way Down?': On the Constitution of Power and Interest," in *Social Theory of International Politics*, Alexander Wendt, 92–138 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[5] See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, ed. Terence Hawkes (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).

dimensions of an individual's livelihood and the external dimensions of the broader international arena. They state:

> Identity determines how you are treated, what is expected of you, what you expect of yourself, what jobs will be available to you, what jobs you will even apply for, what your health will be, whether you will be allocated as a primary carer for children, whether you will be seen as an enemy or friend. In the conventional perception of international relations we can start thinking about effects of identity politics by seeing which identifiable groups become the privileged referents. That is, who or what do mainstream international relations observers bother to pay attention to or expect anything of?[6]

Along the same line of thinking, Albert Paolini argues for an intersubjective theoretical approach to IR so as to allocate a space of analytic importance to the marginalised societies of the developing world,[7] departing from the premise that mainstream IR observers traditionally expect only a minimal contribution from them. This is, of course, aside from the provision of substantial production factors, i.e., cheap labour and cheap natural resources, to sustain what Marxist critics of the global economic order label the mere proliferation of a perpetually unequal relationship of dependency between the peripheries and the metropolises. The postcolonial paradigm coincides with the gist of these analyses in that the "privileged referents" are challenged to relinquish their dominance in a bid to paint a more accurate depiction of the lived experiences of those under-the-radar societies, which are not only

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[6] Marysia Zalewski and Cynthia Enloe, "Questions about Identity in International Relations," in *International Relations Theory Today*, eds. Ken Booth and Steve Smith (Oxford: Polity Press, 1995), 282–3.

[7] Although I agree that the developing world cannot be homogenised into a single unit of analysis without eliding important differences that forsake comparison, I use an understanding of the developing world to constitute those countries and societies within countries that only marginally benefit from the global allocation of material wealth, more often than not produced in part by their own labour and/or secured at the outright manipulation of their weakened negotiating position.

characteristically ignored but also systematically repressed.[8]   This is how the postcolonial imperative of Black identity emerges as being sanctioned to be articulated in contemporary Mexico.

The quest to welcome the population of African ancestry, to which Black Mexicans belong, to find its home in an edifying self-identification process that is detangled from the tentacles of the colonial construct is paramount. The experience of discrimination and racism towards Blacks in the West stems from an identical root. Notwithstanding the substantial variation between the societies, it is of utmost importance to recognise a core Black experience, which in turn validates the concept of the African Diaspora. This seems to be the common first step to be taken in the way of redeeming the multivalent genuineness of Blackness as experienced by the Black subject. This does not imply, however, that the race of an individual is telling of a fixed, biological essence which transcends all determinative, social factors, thus providing a blanket-cohesiveness to cover all members of that race. Race is not a biological classification that is a natural given. Rather, the concept of the historical location is consistently defended throughout this thesis in demonstrating identity as contingent on race and ethnicity, on the one hand, as social phenomena with great political salience and resilience and, on the other hand, as concepts thoroughly rooted in veritable, authoritative experience.

Hence, the task at hand forms part of the greater postcolonial project. In essence, this "is a celebration of the particular and the marginal that envisages peoples

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[8] I say systematically so as to stress that this repression is not merely generated by accident, being *naturally* attributable to an unfortunate yet anticipated by-product of the zero-sum logic sustaining the metropolis-periphery structure, which generates the division between the developed and the developing worlds.

of the Third World carving out independent identities in a de-Europeanized space of *recovery* and *difference*."[9] The imperative of recovery originates as a response to the racist theorising concerning the African person – and consequently her progeny scattered across the Diaspora – as ahistorical. Likewise, difference is understood not as if the African was diametrically the opposite of the European, trapped in an inescapable cycle of antagonism. Instead, it is the assertion that "the particular and the marginal" cannot be comprehended from a framework established by the dominant. An alternative though not competing framework must be created in order to appropriately situate the distinctive experiences of these peoples.

Allotting a voice to the oppressed peoples of the world is more than a placating act of recognition. Of course, this is an essentially significant aim of any and all resistance struggles sustained by the oppressed, to be acknowledged not merely as a perennial bystander in the unravelling of the story as narrated by the dominant. It should also lead to new ways of thinking about and knowing the world at large and more specifically for the theme at hand the African Diaspora as a "unit of analysis"[10] that embodies as much diversity as it does sameness. The idea that all knowledge is traceable to an identity, that is to say a location in social space determined by a particular period of time, is presented, so that the concept of identity becomes a pillar consideration to any academic undertaking, and not simply limited to the realm of the social sciences. Thus, the interaction between experience, knowledge, and identity will prove to be an important theoretical focal point as the epistemic and political salience of identity is defended.

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[9] Paolini, *Navigating Modernity*, 6 [my emphasis].

[10] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993), 15.

2. Varying shades of Blackness in Mexico

Unbeknownst to many, New Spain was a significant participant in the Atlantic slave trade. Nowadays, the presence of a resident population of African descendents, identifiable as such, equivalent to approximately 0.5% of all Mexicans boasts this historical fact.[11] Coinciding with the thrust of the typical, Latin American approach to race relations, the Mexican government does not recognise or utilise categories pertaining to its African descendents in its census-taking, thus the statistical data available is only an approximation.[12] Nowadays, the Black population is concentrated in the Costa Chica region on the Pacific coast of the southern states of Oaxaca and Guerrero, as well as in the state of Veracruz, although Mexicans of African descent saturated a generous extension of the country up until the nineteenth century.[13] Prior to the pioneering, anthropological studies of Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán begun in 1942, local academia all but shunned any discourse on Blackness. Perhaps a process of

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[11] To give an estimation of the number of Black Mexicans, according to the 2004 publication *Afroméxico*, Mexico was home to 450,000 Blacks in the 1990s; Ben Vinson III and Bobby Vaughn, "Introduction," in *Afroméxico. El pulso de la población negra en México: una historia recordada, olvidada y vuelta a recordar*, Ben Vinson III and Bobby Vaughn (Mexico City: Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas and Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004), 11. Julia Isabel Flores Dávila, local investigator with the prestigious Mexico City university, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, also cites the approximation published by Vinson and Vaughn in her research investigation, which will also serve an integral part of the analysis provided in chapter three of this thesis; see Julia Isabel Flores Dávila, ed., "Afrodescendientes en México: reconocimiento y propuestas para evitar la discriminación," Dirección General Adjunta de Estudios, Legislación y Políticas Públicas of the Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación, working paper, no. E-19-2006 (Mexico City, December 2006), 9.

[12] Flores Dávila, "Afrodescendientes en México," 8–9.

[13] See Appendix 1 for a map of the Costa Chica region and Appendix 2 for a map of the state of Veracruz.

'selective memory'[14] is culpable for this omission. As coined by Theodore Vincent, "racial amnesia"[15] has come to characterise the virtual silence with which Mexico has treated its population of African ancestry.

All in all, this has produced an ignorant national population – regardless of racial or ethnic grouping – sorely disconnected from their true historicity, intentionally sanctioned as such by the political elites post-independence. This severance speaks volumes for the retarded growth of Black consciousness-raising in Mexico, in addition to the sense of foreignness regarding 'anything Black' exhibited by the wider national population, regardless of skin hue or self-identification.[16] For instance, it was not until the mid 1990s that a political-minded organisation oriented towards Blacks emerged as *México Negro* in the Costa Chica, where the vast majority of Afro-Mexicans are located.[17] Importantly so, the way Blackness is internalised and then regenerated by Afro-Mexicans themselves is more of a reflection of what I call a

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[14] Danné Davis makes reference to the proclivity towards a process of selective memory when a cultural group is faced with having to recognise African roots as part of their formation; Danné E. Davis, "Wait a Minute, Before You Call Me Black," *Multicultural Perspectives* 4, no. 1 (2002): 45.

[15] Theodore G. Vincent, "Racial Amnesia – African Puerto Rico and Mexico," *Konch Magazine*, January 1999, section 'Archives' – 'Essays', http://www.ishmaelreedpub.com/ (accessed April 24, 2008).

[16] Laura Lewis also frames part of her study around this idea of the *foreignness* of Blacks, drawing from the way in which local narratives in the Costa Chica depict the relationship of belonging to the region and also the country as differentially expressed by Indians and *morenos*. Lewis prefers to use the term '*moreno*' because this is the most common term of self-identification used by Black Mexicans themselves. The term '*moreno*' lends to an array of varied meanings within both the broader Mexican context and the particular location of the Costa Chica, in addition to highlighting how 'Blacks' as a self-identified group do not exist in Mexico at present; this is one of the few points of consensus among scholars within Afro-Mexican studies regarding issues of identity. The reasons for which I nevertheless choose to speak of 'Black Mexicans' will become obvious as the thesis progresses. See "Of Ships and Saints: History, Memory, and Place in the Making of *Moreno* Mexican Identity," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 1 (February 2001): 62–82.

[17] Vaughn, "Los negros, los indígenas y la diaspora," in *Afroméxico*, 89–93.

passive understanding of what it means to be Black, an understanding which is deeply reflective of how Blackness was conceived centuries ago.

As such, the current imperative for these identifiably Black communities is to reject the Enlightenment formula of Blackness in favour of an identification process that (a) resituates their Africanness, not as a show of exoticism to be tailored to meet the political fancy of the elites in further exploiting 'difference' for their own gains, and (b) presents to these communities genuine tools to advance their development, not as a separate entity in furthering their contradictory, 'illegitimate' sense of belonging but as contributing material to the fabric of the Mexican social quilt. Thus, this thesis aims to show that, by means of firstly engaging in a re-conceptualisation of Blackness inspired from a Diasporic approach to Black subjectivity and collective Black identity, it is possible and moreover an imperative for Mexicans of African descent to rethink how their Blackness and Mexicanness are simultaneously negotiated.

The overarching endeavour of this thesis, then, is the vindication of a Black identity in Mexico by drawing on a framework of subjectivity as set forth by a range of prominent intellectuals of the Diaspora while simultaneously engaging the complex nature of Blackness as it is currently experienced in the pertinent Mexican communities. It is, above all, an attempt to provide the subaltern Black Mexican an arena so that, "regardless of their marginalized status, [they] can find representation within a theory of the subject"[18] that gives them more liberty to negotiate the content of their identities. In this sense, Afro-Mexico, as a collective representing and constituted by Mexicans of African descent, will be better equipped to engage in an

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[18] Michelle M. Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 231.

effectively articulated identity politics that mobilises action to combat the direness of their economic, political, and, in some ways, social positioning. As a secondary effect, achieving political agency will also guarantee Afro-Mexico's greater contribution of its rightful portion to a wider-reaching understanding of Blackness, "the exclusive purchase"[19] of the African Diaspora.

At the risk of appearing overly ambitious, this thesis proposes that advocating the consolidation of a public Black identity, which is perceived by the entire Black population to be inclusive and not externally imposed, may positively stimulate the development of the communities inhabited by Mexicans of African descent, given the ineffectuality with which Blackness has been formulated thus far. It is my fundamental belief that the imperative of every Black individual is the redemption of selfhood and subsequently achieving political agency. An Afrocentric adherence to a racialised essence does not spur this imperative, but the historical construct of the Black race does. Slavery instigated a pathological sense of self in the Black individual which still thrives today; and so it must be confronted and all of its manifestations strategically rejected. This pathology is not only expressed in an ambivalence manifested, during certain periods, by members of the Diaspora towards Africa itself, as the motherland and her inhabitants,[20] but also aimed at debilitating the inner sanity of the Black individual as a capable, rational human worthy of occupying the same breathing, thinking, and living space as her White counterpart. For Black Mexicans in the rural areas of the Costa Chica, the daily interactions and discursive preoccupations with Indians is more of a primary concern than is the role of the White

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[19] Paolini, *Navigating Modernity*, 39.

[20] See Tunde Adeleke, "Historical Problems of Afrocentric Consciousness," *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 29, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 547–57.

person, adding a striking dimension to the discussion of Blackness in contemporary Mexico. This thesis does not remotely pretend to fulfil a version of the civilising mission, modifying the caricatures to now depict Diaspora versus Black Mexico. On the contrary, this imperative stems from being compelled to contribute to "the global project of black advancement",[21] infused with a communitarian sense of obligation that transcends nationalism in savouring true Diasporic flavour.

3. General hypothesis and sub-hypotheses

The general hypothesis I wish to sustain is that *the persistent consolidation of a public Black identity in Mexico may act as a catalyst for significant growth for the country's population of Afro-descendents by positively impacting the socio-economic development of their communities*.

The following are the sub-hypotheses asserted: (a) *the historic problem of* mestizaje *(race mixing) in understanding Mexican national identity has perturbed the ability of the population of Afro-descendents to appropriately engage the quest of Black consciousness*; and (b) *the utilitarian nature with which Black identity is frequently asserted in Mexico has served to prejudice the intent of actively stimulating Black consciousness as a means to invite the active participation of Mexico's Black population in the interactive, discursive exchanges of the African Diaspora*.

4. Organisation and structure of thesis

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[21] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 35.

This thesis is organised into three chapters and will be structured according to the following division of ideas. The first chapter will explore the conceptual framework of identity politics, mainly accomplished by advocating a post-positivist, realist account of identity in rejecting the extremist positions sustained as the essentialist and postmodernist accounts. With the aim of generating a politically healthy view of identity, the categories of race and ethnicity will be analysed so as to defensively argue their legitimacy as primary indicators of identity. Despite "the brutal absurdity of racial classification",[22] the complexity of the social reality which they have evoked cannot be conveniently deflated by simply theorising a post-racial/ethnic future, however lovely and progressive the thought may resonate in the deftness of the violent degradation reminiscent of racial theorising. Refuge should not be *uncritically* sought in the hybridity that is characteristic of the Black person in the Atlantic, done all in an effort to escape the 'curse' that is the African. Black identity politics will be conceptualised in order to appropriately define Blackness, its theoretical challenges, and its meaningfulness for the everyday, lived experience of the Black individual. Thus, chapter one will lay the groundwork for situating the subsequent discussions about Black identity and its political ramifications within the Mexican context against the panorama of the Diaspora.

Chapter two will provide a historical analysis of the Black Other in Mexico. The chapter will begin by exploring the foreignness with which Blackness is periodically treated, by analysing the controversy generated around the promulgation of the *Memín Pinguín* postage stamp, claimed by some to be a non-intentioned

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[22] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, cited by Michael J. C. Echeruo, "An African Diaspora: The Ontological Project," in *The African Diaspora: African Origins and New World Identities*, eds. Isidore Okpewho, Carole Boyce Davies, and Ali Alamin Mazrui (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 5.

offensive expression of Mexican popular culture while others rejected the comic caricature as racist and inexcusably derogatory towards Black people. The chapter will then delve into how Afro-Mexican[23] studies have developed on the scholastic and national landscapes, from the pioneering works of Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán to contemporary activists like Luz María Martínez Montiel. Finally, by expounding on the African participation in the colonial era of New Spain, the historical discussion will be limited to questions regarding the socio-political construction of national identity, contingent on the racist concept of *mestizaje*, in addition to briefly describing the socio-economic status of the Africans.

Chapter three will open by exploring how Blackness is conceived of within both the ideational and material frameworks through which Mexicanness is produced across the general spectrum of the pertinent communities. The methodology for this chapter will draw closely from the recent, ethnographical research undertaken by three anthropologists (one Mexican, two from the United States); these are Laura Lewis, Bobby Vaughn, and Julia Isabel Flores Dávila. The complex and contradictory relationship between Blackness and Indianness will also provide a vital

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[23] Although differences do exist between the terms 'Afro-Mexican' (spelt Afromexican by some, like Laura Lewis, for example), 'Black Mexican', 'Afromestizo', 'Afro-descendent', among others, I will use them interchangeably throughout this thesis. In this sense, I follow the example of Patrick Carroll's usage in his writings about Black Africans and their descendents in Mexico. 'Afromestizo' is the preferred term used by Mexican scholars – and I would dare add the ethnic label 'White' to this group – beginning from the time of Aguirre Beltrán. 'Afro-Mexican' is the term used by most international academics, following the pattern prevalent in the field of Black studies, self-employed by persons of African descent all over the Americas and Europe. Thus, the importance of *language*, i.e., how this group is labelled by others in contrast or comparison to how they self-identify, is readily recognised as a contentious and enriching focus to be given to the study, although such an analysis must be (understandably) limited due to time and space constraints.

point of analysis.[24] Specifically, the conflation of public and subjective identities in creating a politicised, Black ethnic identity will be analysed, and the organisation *México Negro* will be the focal point as the embodiment of these consciousness-raising efforts. The final section of this chapter will provide the closing analysis necessary to prove the viability of the central hypothesis, by establishing a constructive relationship between the strengthening of a Black identity and the holistic development of these communities, primarily in terms of socio-economic advancement. As such, the section will briefly discuss the conditions of these communities concerning health, education, housing, and employment opportunities as well as the implementation of government strategies in addressing the main obstacles to development.

Identity is offered as one of the possible vehicles to stimulate development by considering the impact of the adverse historical configuration of the Black person. This argument thus assumes a significant quantifiable and qualitative correlation, embedded in the historical experience of these communities, between their material marginalisation and racial classification. In spite of this, a reductive approach is not taken by overproportionately weighing the phenomenon of racism, for *discrimination* in terms of class relations is asserted to be the greater problem confronting Mexico. Indeed, the pre-eminent problem facing today's world is the growing gap between the developing world and the overdeveloped world, albeit race is still intimately connected with this world-wide division of labour. As such, expounding on the way in which class relations are conceptualised *in terms of* race is still a valid, academic

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[24] Both Lewis and Vaughn, in addition to several other Afro-Mexican scholars, widely use the terms 'Blackness', 'Mexicanness', and 'Indianness' when analysing how identity is constructed by Mexicans of African descent today.

enterprise. Nevertheless, it is important to note that this thesis does not intend to directly analyse *why* these Black Mexican communities do not share in the generation of wealth in this country, although some indications will be given. Rather, the question of *how* the notion of Black identity can positively correlate to their development is tackled. Finally, chapter three will close by articulating the challenges for a Diasporic, postcolonial Black identity to take root in Mexico.