

## CHAPTER TWO

### **The Black Other in Mexico: An Historical Analysis**

#### **1. Foreignness of being Black in Mexico**

The climate of multicultural conviviality in Mexico is wanting; that is to say, the actuality is more visible in academic discourse than it is in social interaction, referring, among other aspects, to language, attitudes, and even national priorities. Mexican society is more divided than one would typically enjoy admitting. Discrimination based on skin colour can be widely observed.<sup>1</sup> Although the dissolution of the colonial caste system meant that race became a more diluted concept in national politics, in the sense that legal segregation was never a lived experience for the country's Black population post-Independence, the vestiges of racism still persist. In that regard, Mexico is no exception to the east-to-west, north-to-south phenomenon emphasising 'the whiter the better', which is sweeping the world at large.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of whether it is labelled 'shadism' or 'colourism', this warped yardstick for favouritism is deeply ingrained in the consciousness of the average person. Mexican idioms provide very fruitful ground for exploring how discrimination is deeply embedded in the attitudes of locals. For instance, '*moreno*' (brown-skinned person) is the preferred terminology for Black persons precisely

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent study of racism and discrimination in contemporary Mexican society, see Guitté Hartog, Louise Greathouse Amador, and José Gil García Pérez, eds., *Matices sociales del color de la piel en México: claroscuro sobre una realidad oculta* (Puebla: Impresos Angelópolis, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> For an engaging introduction to the pervasiveness of skin colour discrimination and its origins, see Kajalie Shehreen Islam et al., "Fair Factor: The Whiter the Better," *Star Weekend Magazine* 5, no. 94, May 26, 2006, <http://www.thedailystar.net/magazine/2006/05/02/cover.htm> (accessed April 19, 2008).

because of the association that the word ‘*negro*’ has with a plethora of insults, forming as an integral part of the vernacular culture.<sup>3</sup>

Admittedly, difference is always set on a pedestal for the mere sake of public amusement, although the purposes of exploiting ‘difference’ extend far beyond as my analysis has already begun to set forth in chapter one. Likewise, the black-looking<sup>4</sup> people, as well as the indigenous-looking, in Mexico are the obvious targets for discrimination, or worse even demonisation, simply because of their darker skin colour. The ‘natural’ logic of ‘common sense’ that supports this racial targeting also manifests itself in the more benign form of, for example, cringing in confusion or disbelief when a dark-skinned person is seen decked in an Armani business suit while sitting at the head of an executive round-table meeting. Likewise, the same story would be applicable in the case of a very Indian-looking executive. On the same note, it would be partial to forgo mentioning that difference is, of course, not always construed in negative terms, as there are numerous examples that highlight how difference is frequently celebrated as a striking contrast to what people are accustomed to seeing and hearing.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Indeed, as a Black person, I am seldom described as a *negra* here in Mexico as people do not want to offend me by calling me *negra*, as if my first instinct would be that they were insulting me by the description. On the flipside, contextualising the term is important because referring to someone as “*mi negra*” is also a show of endearment, especially on the Caribbean shore of the state of Veracruz where the Cuban influence is considerable.

<sup>4</sup> I say ‘black-looking’ instead of explicitly saying ‘Black’ because this mode of discrimination is conceived based solely on phenotype, not considering whether the individual target in fact self-identifies as Black.

<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the pervasiveness of the Mexican concept of *malinchismo*, defined by the Real Academia Española, which is the standard authority on the Spanish language, as the “attitude of one who shows fondness for what’s foreign with disdain for one’s own”, is evidence enough of the celebratory aspect of difference; “Actitud de quien muestra apego a lo extranjero con menosprecio de lo propio” [my translation]. See Real Academia Española, *Diccionario de la Lengua Española – Vigésima segunda edición*, [http://buscon.rae.es/draeI/SrvltConsulta?TIPO\\_BUS=3&LEMA=malinchismo](http://buscon.rae.es/draeI/SrvltConsulta?TIPO_BUS=3&LEMA=malinchismo) (accessed June 22, 2008).

Hence, on the one hand, ignorance, as in lack of awareness, is one of the underlying reasons for the unchecked attention cast towards people of African descent.<sup>6</sup> The portion of the Mexican population that has actually conversed with a Black person is particularly limited, whether she/he be a native or non-native to these lands; this is a noteworthy point to keep in mind.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, various racist encounters with Mexican authorities attest to the blatant disrespect with which Blackness can be treated in this country. One prime example of the latter is the frequency with which Afro-Mexicans are consistently mistaken for undocumented Central Americans and then subjected to discriminatory treatment.<sup>8</sup> For instance, an analysis of the cases of discrimination dealt with by the *Comité Ciudadano de Defensa de los Naturalizados y los Afromexicanos* (CCDNAM),<sup>9</sup> with its seat in Pachuca, Hidalgo, would be an appealing point of departure for a thesis focused on the racist manifestations of authority and power in Mexico.

Similar encounters of divisiveness as just described are a reflection of the colonial legacy and its denigrating attribution to Blackness, above all in how the

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<sup>6</sup> An anecdotal justification I have for formulating this opinion is based (among others) on the experience of a Haitian friend who recently lived in Cholula for a year's student exchange. She would walk to and from her house frequently throughout the day, passing the same local entrepreneurs by their street-side food stalls, and each time would warrant extensive and obvious stares from these Mexicans. Perhaps the foreignness of her dreadlocked hair and dark-skinned complexion made it impossible to absorb in one single glance. Indeed, I am sure that a child-like curiosity played a significant role, so that this anecdote in no way lends to the conclusion that the fascination with 'difference' is entirely malicious in nature. To the contrary, this ignorance is concocted out of an interesting blend of curiosity, disbelief, and stereotypical understandings of Blackness, for the most part, and is both celebrated and stigmatised.

<sup>7</sup> I use 'native' so as to focus the reader's attention to the fact that Mexico's African roots are as old as the Spanish roots. Hence, I do not pretend whatsoever to argue that Africans are native to the lands in likened respect to the Indigenous peoples.

<sup>8</sup> Bobby Vaughn, "Race and Nation: A Study of Blackness in Mexico" (PhD dissertation, Stanford University, 2001), 178.

<sup>9</sup> The CCDNAM is a commission established to address any issues pertaining to the defence of the rights of both naturalised Mexicans and Afro-Mexicans as rightful citizens of 'multiethnic' Mexico. The founder is a naturalised Mexican born in Haiti. Unfortunately, I was unable to locate an official website for the commission, but rather was first introduced to it in a newspaper article. See, for instance, Roberto Ramírez, "Agentes del INM acusados por racismo," *El Sol de Hidalgo*, September 19, 2007.

concept of *mestizaje* has not, in fact, created a non-racialised citizenry. However admirable the attempt was, it failed in some fundamental ways, to be elucidated later in this chapter. It must be mentioned, though, that this thesis does not directly analyse racism and its manifestations, despite the fact that any discussion about the concept of Blackness and its political salience will necessarily include a minimal discussion to that extent.

### **1.1 A reading of the *Memín Pinguín* controversy**

To further validate the idea of the foreignness of Blackness in Mexico, the controversy surrounding the local post office's promulgation of the *Memín Pinguín* postage stamp is quite illustrative. The stamp recently was printed and distributed in commemoration of the 1940s popular comic character, attributed to the creativity of Yolanda Vargas Dulché.<sup>10</sup> In an editorial piece in the newspaper *El Universal* on July 2, 2005, Professor José Antonio Aguilar Rivera of the prominent institution of higher education, the *Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas* (CIDE), engaged the public by relating how exchanges with Mexico's northern neighbour once again shed light on their relationship, characterised by both interrelatedness and divergences. The occasion of the postage stamp printing, which was circulated for internal consumption and yet still generated a heated, cross-border debate, gave way to differentiated responses in the United States' African-American (and Afro-Latin) community and in Mexico.

*Memín Pinguín*, a precocious, Black boy/man depicted with exaggerated, chimpanzee-like features, is locally celebrated as an expression of popular culture.

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<sup>10</sup> Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas, "*Memín Pinguín*: uno de los cómics mexicanos más populares como instrumento para codificar al negro," *Afro-Hispanic Review* 22, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 52.

Blacks in the United States disagreed wholeheartedly with the purported innocence of the character, however, instead fixating on what they considered as the overtly racist depiction of the Black person. The prominent political activist Jesse Jackson even exhorted the Mexican administration to recall the distributed stamps. What is most interesting in serving as a useful illustration of the idea of the foreignness of Blackness in Mexico is the intellectual response of Professor Aguilar as expressed in his editorial piece.



Figure 1: Postage stamps published by the Mexican Postal Service (SEPAMEX)<sup>11</sup>

It is clear that Professor Aguilar vehemently adheres to the limiting concept of *mestizaje* as central to his understanding of race relations in Mexico when he declares that the response of the African-American community was totally exaggerated, given the vast difference in how anti-Black racism has been expressed in the neighbouring, North American nations. It must be noted that this reading does not pretend to validate the reaction produced in the United States but instead is presented to draw

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<sup>11</sup> Retrieved from Marco Katz, "Tiras, timbres y estereotipos: el negro Memín Pinguín y la manipulación de la cultura popular con representaciones étnicas," *Culturas Populares* 5 (July – December 2007): 7, <http://www.culturaspopulares.org/textos5/articulos/katz.pdf> (accessed May 31, 2008).

attention to how the concept of *mestizaje* has blinded the wider Mexican community (as representative in the opinion of Professor Aguilar) to what is inexcusably racist. By believing that racial inequalities embedded in the colonial caste system disappear in the melting pot upon creating the *mestizo* person, Mexicans remain largely uncritical of the racist subterfuge,<sup>12</sup> which is overtly expressed in the character of *Memín Pinguín*. This rambunctious child/man, however popular and endearing he may be, is reminiscent of how Count Arthur de Gobineau, the notable Frenchman known as the Father of Modern Racism,<sup>13</sup> pictures the African person, as excessively passionate in need of White blood to tame and exploit the innate, creative energies that are his sole contribution to human progress.<sup>14</sup> Hence, as Michelle Wright summarises as the gist of Gobineau's reasoning, "[a]lthough the Negro lacks the Aryan's discipline, determination, and drive, he nonetheless possesses a certain creative vitality – although his inability to motivate himself in any constructive way prevents him from producing anything of note with that energy".<sup>15</sup> *Memín Pinguín* is so unbelievably stereotypical of how the White supremacist, racial theorists depicted the African that it must astound the consciousness of any educated, self-identified Black individual.<sup>16</sup>

This fact seems to have surpassed the comprehension of Professor Aguilar in his analysis. As such, he failed to address the heart of the concern of the African-American (and Afro-Latino) community. By referencing the ethnographical research

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<sup>12</sup> Taunya Lovell Banks argues this same point in "Mestizaje and the Mexican Mestizo Self: No Hay Sangre Negra, So There Is No Blackness," *Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal* 15, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 199–234.

<sup>13</sup> Wright, *Becoming Black*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> For a reading of Count Arthur de Gobineau's 'Negro', see Wright, *Becoming Black*, 42–52.

<sup>15</sup> Wright, *Becoming Black*, 43.

<sup>16</sup> For a brief detailing of some additional reactions to the *Memín Pinguín* fiasco, see Banks, "Mestizaje and the Mexican Mestizo Self," 202.

of Bobby Vaughn, he uses a red herring tactic to draw attention to the racism perpetuated towards the Indians by Afro-Mexicans in the Costa Chica region. Again, Aguilar fails to reach the heart of the debate. He does not explore how the anti-Indian racism is a by-product of the complexity of the *mestizaje* discourse which supplanted the African and thus created a crisis of belonging among the Afro-Mexican population, which saw them take on the same racist language employed by the colonisers and their descendents. Of course, this does not condone or make light of this sort of bigotry, but it is important to accentuate the need for contextualisation.

Ironically, this is what Professor Aguilar aims to communicate, how the *contexts* of Mexico and the United States differ widely. What matters, he argues, is not the “‘objectivity’ of the representation, but if in its moment the character was seen as a denigrating manifestation like the word Negro and the pickaninnys in the US”.<sup>17</sup> His response is ‘no’, that “[t]he majority of black Mexicans perhaps did not feel offended by the caricature at the time”.<sup>18</sup> He may be right in this sense, but it is certainly arguable that Black Mexicans have not been allotted the necessary analytical tools to gain perspective enough to see the denigrating origin of any representation of like nature. Indeed, Aguilar’s opinion is certainly contradicted by recent statements expressed in the ethnographical surveys conducted by Julia Isabel Flores Dávila, which reveal how some Black Mexicans “consider that the government has been a part of the discrimination, and especially President Fox with his comments that Mexicans do the work in the U.S. that not even the blacks want to do, *and the Memín*

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<sup>17</sup> “El punto no es la ‘objetividad’ de la representación, sino si en su momento el personaje fue visto como una manifestación denigrante como la palabra *Negro* [*sic*] y los *pickaninnys* en EU.”

<sup>18</sup> “La mayoría de los mexicanos negros quizá no se haya sentido ofendida por la caricatura en su momento.”

*Pinguín stamps*".<sup>19</sup> This mention of the offensiveness of the postage stamps by some Afro-Mexicans themselves should be quite illuminating to the wider public when considering how these stereotypical images of the Black person do more damage than good. Furthermore, the Afro-Mexican scholar Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas would disagree with Aguilar on that respect, as he published an article in 2003 explaining how *Memín Pinguín* is not as innocent as popularly accepted.<sup>20</sup>

What needs to be clearly understood regarding the portrayal of the Black person in Mexican popular culture, as in the case of *Memín Pinguín* and other similar representations, is that the target audience is mainly children. These caricatures are intimately connected with childhood memories for Mexicans, and any accusation about how they denigrate the Black person will generate enormous resistance. The depictions are not only an endearing, playful way of entertaining children but are also used in educating them about acceptable social behaviour as well as about difference. The personification of the Black person is almost identical across the spectrum.

For instance, an extremely popular children's icon is a character called Cri Cri the Little Singing Cricket (*Cri Cri el Grillito Cantor*) who sings children's songs.<sup>21</sup> One particular song entitled the "Little Black Watermelon Man" ("*Negrito Sandía*") warns children about the consequences of using dirty language, orienting the lyrics around the example of a Black man who had "an angelic face" ("*con cara angelical*") but who was "foul-mouthed" from the time he first learned to speak ("*pero según memoria, al aprender a hablar, salió más deslenguado que un perico de arrabal*").

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<sup>19</sup> Flores Dávila, "Afrodescendientes en México," 86 [my translation and emphasis].

<sup>20</sup> See Hernández Cuevas, "*Memín Pinguín*."

<sup>21</sup> See the following website featuring the songs of Francisco Gabilondo Soler, the voice and genius behind the character known as "Cri Cri el Grillito Cantor" ("Cri Cri the Singing Cricket"), who began performing the songs on the radio in 1934. The songs "*Negrito Sandía*" and "*Negrito Bailarín*" are of particular interest. Gabriel Orozco, ed., "La página no oficial de Cri Cri el Grillito Cantor: Francisco Gabilondo Soler," <http://www.cri-cri.net/Canciones.html> (accessed June 22, 2008).

Another is called “Little Black Dancing Man” (“*Negrito Bailarín*”), featuring a talented but capricious character. Two of the lines of the song’s lyrics draw particular attention to the colonial-like, stereotypical way in which the Black person is innocently portrayed; one refers to the dancing doll’s bad behaviour (“*pero que se porta mal*”) and the other to his laziness (“*perezoso, mueva los pies*”).

Another children’s game that features a similar representation is the Mexican equivalent to bingo, locally known as *La Lotería*.<sup>22</sup> The game is widely sold both nationally and internationally, gaining notoriety as enjoyable, Mexican-style diversion. One of the game cards depicts “the little Black man” (“*el negrito*”), accompanied by the phrases “the one who ate the sugar” (“*el que se comió el azúcar*”) and “the little Black man from Havana, the one who took your sister” (“*el negrito de La Habana, el que se llevó a tu hermana*”). Apart from the rhyming sequence, is it merely ironic that “the little Black man” is associated with sugar, perhaps conjuring up mental images of plantation life in the state of Veracruz, and perhaps also associated with the idea of the Black man as notoriously sexually excitable?

Again, the children’s representations in and of themselves are not entirely negative, which is evident in the defensive posture sustained by Professor Aguilar in vehemently marking the difference between anti-Black racism in the United States and in Mexico. He is absolutely correct in doing so but ultimately fails to understand that these cultural representations nevertheless lend to the perpetuation of viewing the Black person as he/she was depicted in the colonial past. In this sense, the form of racism is *benign* because the effects are not as audacious, comparatively speaking, as

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<sup>22</sup> See Juguetes Mexicanos, “Lotería,” <http://www.juguetesmexicanos.com/loteria.htm> (accessed June 22, 2008). The game is also widely sold both nationally and internationally; for instance, Wal-Mart stores in parts of the United States are publicised as selling both *La Lotería* and the *Memín Pinguín* comic books.

they cleverly weave together both enjoyable and denigrating aspects. Any attempt to make light of the issue merely circumvents the inevitable conclusion that the Black person was not fully integrated into national society at the dissolution of the colonial caste system, for any popularly welcomed and revered representation that is clearly reminiscent of the racist colonial past only serves to further cement how Black Mexicans precariously negotiate their national belonging in terms of the apparent incongruity with being both Black and Mexican.

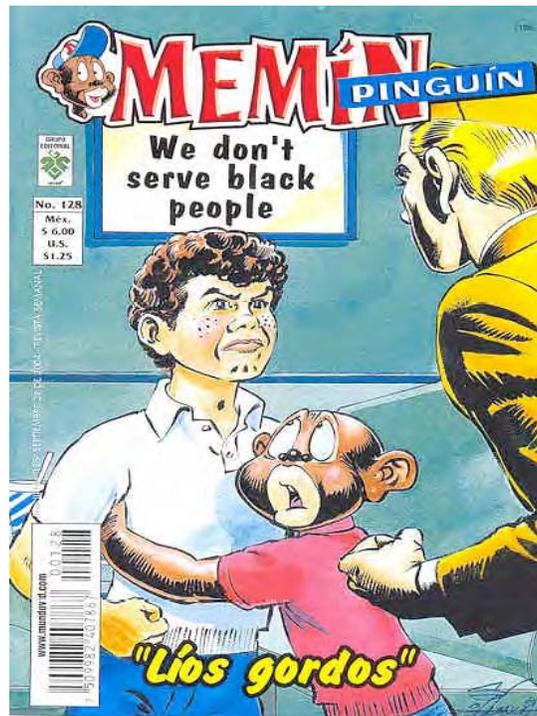


Figure 2: *Memín Pinguín* comic book<sup>23</sup>

In summary, the important issue is not to induce a finger-pointing contest about which country has a muckier history of racist popular culture. The United States is also home to a number of parallel caricatures, one especially named Ebony

<sup>23</sup> Retrieved from Katz, "Tiras, timbres y estereotipos," 2.

White featuring the same chimpanzee-like traits.<sup>24</sup> Nor should this reading of the iconic representations be interpreted as an accusation of the hidden maliciousness of Mexico's popular culture towards Blacks. The stereotypes are not entirely negative; indeed, Mexicans broadly express fondness for the mischievousness and loveable nature of these characters. They are, however, indelibly reflective of the colonial conceptualisation of the Black person. This *fact* remains to be critically engaged by Mexicans in defending the innocence of characters like *Memín Pinguín*, perhaps because they were most likely first introduced to this colonial stereotype as a child. What *mestizaje* has done, by neatly theorising the Mexican nation as *mestizo* and thus racially hybrid (and not divided), is remove the perspective required to critically assess how racism did not, in fact, die away upon the dissolution of the caste system at the onset of independence. *Memín Pinguín*, as an (unacceptable) expression of popular culture, is an outstanding example of how *mestizaje* has failed to honestly engage Mexicans in a discourse that situates the divergences of the pluri-ethnic population. The mere fact that Professor Aguilar is able to comfortably assume that Afro-Mexicans were not "offended... at the time" illuminates the depth of the historical negation of a positive, Black self-identification.

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<sup>24</sup> Katz, "Tiras, timbres y estereotipos," 9.



Figure 3: Ebony White<sup>25</sup>

## 2. Introducing Afro-Mexican studies

Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán inaugurated the studies about Mexico's African heritage with the 1946 publication of his first ethnohistory, entitled *La población negra en México. Estudio etnohistórico*. His investigation officially began in 1942 at the direction of Manuel Gamio, Head of the Demographic Department of the Ministry of the Interior at the time.<sup>26</sup> Educated under Franz Boas, known as the father of American anthropology, Gamio is widely recognised to be the quintessential Mexican anthropologist. Likewise, Aguirre Beltrán trained under Melville Herskovits, the pioneer Africanist anthropologist of his era who was also educated under Boas. It is significant to note the academic training of these scholars to reveal how it became possible for the interest in Afro-Mexican studies to first germinate.

<sup>25</sup> Retrieved from Katz, "Tiras, timbres y estereotipos," 5.

<sup>26</sup> Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra en México. Estudio etnohistórico* (1946; second edition with new prologue, Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1972), 9.

The use of the ethnohistorical approach to studying populations of African descent in the Americas was the brainchild of Herskovits.<sup>27</sup> This research method of cultural anthropology basically entails an historical study which identifies a particular ethnic group as the protagonist of their own narrative, with the objective to describe the group's ways of life as developed chronologically in the past by using a wide variety of analytical tools that reach beyond the traditional strategies employed by the average historian. Motivated under Herskovits' tutelage,<sup>28</sup> Aguirre Beltrán extended his anthropological studies in the 1940s to include the Afro element, as he was first trained under Gamio, who is also considered to be one of the most influential *indigenistas* in Mexico, and later under Herskovits. Aguirre Beltrán's studies depart from an interdisciplinary position, combining the focuses of historical analysis, ethnohistorical analysis, and ethnographical analysis.<sup>29</sup> This proves to be a very comprehensive approach to Afro-Mexican studies, given the holistic framework involved and the innovativeness to include the use of unconventional information sources. This latter element is quite important whenever marginalised groups are the target of study. As will be shown below, official data typically belie the realities of these groups since they are either uncritically deemed to form an integrated part of the dominant culture or written off as analytically inconsequential. For instance, oral narratives and musical expressions tend to dominant the resistance material of Black communities scattered all over Diaspora; thus, cultural forms tend to be

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<sup>27</sup> Gabriel Moedano Navarro, "Bibliohemerografía histórica y etnohistórica sobre la población de origen africano en México," in *Aportaciones a la investigación de archivos del México colonial y a la bibliohemerografía afromexicanista*, eds. Emma Pérez-Rocha and Gabriel Moedano Navarro (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1992), 37.

<sup>28</sup> Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *El negro esclavo en Nueva España. La formación colonial, la medicina popular y otros ensayos* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1994), 23.

<sup>29</sup> Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 278.

simultaneously political, in addition to providing a source of entertainment and/or means of solidarity.

The use of the ethnohistorical approach continues to be used as a primary means of ‘uncovering’ the African presence in Mexico. In the post-Aguirre Beltrán period – as in after his ethnographical investigation of the principal black towns of the Costa Chica, Cuajinicuilapa, San Nicolás, and Maldonado<sup>30</sup> – the geographical studies now range from the economically outstanding locations of Mexico City,<sup>31</sup> Córdoba, Veracruz,<sup>32</sup> and Puebla<sup>33</sup> to northern states like Tamaulipas<sup>34</sup> and southern states like Tabasco.<sup>35</sup> Research institutions in Michoacán and Veracruz, for instance, are becoming actively engaged in the field of Afro-Mexican studies, which can now be termed as such given the widespread interest that grew in homage to Aguirre Beltrán.<sup>36</sup> The establishment of the programme Our Third Root (*Nuestra Tercera Raíz*) within the framework of the national Office of Popular Culture in the 1980s, then headed by anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla<sup>37</sup> and now coordinated by

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<sup>30</sup> See Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Cuijla. Esbozo etnográfico de un pueblo negro* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1958).

<sup>31</sup> See Álvaro Ochoa Serrano, *Afrodescendientes: sobre piel canela* (Morelia, Michoacán: Gobierno del Estado de Michoacán – El Colegio de Michoacán, 1997).

<sup>32</sup> See Adriana Navega Chávez-Hita, *Esclavos negros en las haciendas azucareras de Córdoba, Veracruz, 1690 – 1830* (Xalapa, Veracruz: Centro de Investigaciones Históricas, Universidad Veracruzana, 1987).

<sup>33</sup> See Carlos Paredes Martínez and Blanca Lara Tenorio, “La población negra en los valles centrales de Puebla: orígenes y desarrollo hasta 1681,” in *Presencia africana en México*, ed. Luz María Martínez Montiel, 19–73 (Mexico City: Dirección General de Culturas Populares, 1994).

<sup>34</sup> See Ma. Luisa Herrera Casasús, “Raíces africanas en la población de Tamaulipas,” in *Presencia africana en México*, 463–521.

<sup>35</sup> See Juan Andrade Torres, “Historia de la población negra en Tabasco,” in *Presencia africana en México*, 423–60.

<sup>36</sup> See Álvaro Ochoa Serrano, “Los africanos en México antes de Aguirre Beltrán (1821 – 1924),” in *El rostro colectivo de la nación mexicana*, ed. María Guadalupe Chávez Carvajal, 169–89 (Morelia, Michoacán: Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas de la Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, 1997).

<sup>37</sup> Lewis, “Blacks, Black Indians, Afromexicans,” 901. Also, see Malinali Meza Herrera, “Presentación,” in *Jamás fandango al cielo: narrative afromestiza*, eds. María Cristina Díaz Pérez, Francisca Aparicio Prudente, and Adele García Casarrubias, 9–11 (Mexico City: Dirección General de Culturas Populares, 1993).

Luz María Martínez Montiel, a famed activist for the Afro-Mexican cause, demonstrates the vitality of national interest. The state of Oaxaca has even permitted a group of Afromexican dancers to participate in the internationally recognised Guelaguetza festival. State sponsorship of field investigations, conferences, festivals, and museums all signify the growth of national involvement.<sup>38</sup>

For now, it would be sufficient to note the time lapse between Aguirre Beltrán's studies and the interest generated by the national agenda which in turn propelled academic investigation. Laura Lewis aptly notes that a grave weakness of these academics working within the Third Root project has been that they

have not critically addressed blacks' disappearance from and later re-emergence on the national landscape. Such omissions are significant because they draw further attention to the important parallels between the national and scholarly interests, both of which have hidden blacks and then rediscovered them. Work that remains blind to these processes cannot critically address blacks as 'Afromexicans' or as 'black Indians.' Its assumptions go unquestioned, and *morenos*' experiences of identity formation remain unexplored.<sup>39</sup>

Lewis further notes that apart from the rare exception to the rule, scholars systematically ignore Blackness as a central focus of analysis when dealing with the Mexican nation-state, so that the relation between Indians and the nation dominate. The writings of Bobby Vaughn pose to further respond to this absence of academic material as rightly stressed by Lewis, particularly with regard to the comparative studies currently underway in the context of other Latin American countries. As such, it becomes important to note that, despite this fresh euphoria for everything 'Afro' in

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<sup>38</sup> For a brief description of this recent engagement, see Vaughn, "Los negros, los indígenas y la diáspora," 93–5.

<sup>39</sup> Lewis, "Blacks, Black Indians, Afromexicans," 903.

Mexico, there are some notable, serious drawbacks to the way in which this ‘interest’ has been expressed thus far, though these will be fully discussed in chapter three.

### **3. Colonial baggage: African participation in New Spain**

Aguirre Beltrán affirms that one of the primary reasons for which historians, sociologists, and anthropologists have categorically disregarded the contributions of the African presence to the nation’s consolidation regards the colony’s limited participation during the slave trade and in conjunction with the eventual waning of the slavery-based economy.<sup>40</sup> In practice, slavery endured for about two centuries, from 1530 to 1730, with New Spain experiencing its peak in the transfer of African *ébano* (ebony wood) in the 1590s, exceeding all other colonial importations during the early years, particularly from 1580 to 1640.<sup>41</sup> The wide time gap between the *de facto* emancipation and the *de jure* abolition gives evidence of the decreasing importance related to chattel slavery, given the exponential growth of the *mestizo* populations and their abundant provision of cheap labour. The first president, Vicente Guerrero, decreed slavery’s abolition in 1829, which had a direct impact on the highly reduced population of approximately 3,000 African slaves still remaining<sup>42</sup> and an indirect social consequence in dissolving the caste system based on a racial division which was no longer sustainable in the absence of Black enslavement.

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<sup>40</sup> Aguirre Beltrán, *El negro esclavo en Nueva España*, 24.

<sup>41</sup> Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 48. Also see Colin Palmer, *Slaves of the White God: Blacks in Mexico, 1570 – 1650* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 2.

<sup>42</sup> Vaughn, “Race and Nation,” 27, citing Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Slavery in Latin American and the Caribbean,” in *Encarta Africana*, eds. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Redmond, Washington: Microsoft Corporation, 1999).

Further cited by Aguirre Beltrán was the grave, historical disillusionment that plagued the academics in that they believed the 0.1% population of Black persons was a greater product of the migration of free *negros* from the United States or from the Antilles. Indeed, this is true of small communities located in the states of Yucatan and Quintana Roo, where the Mexican government offered its territory as a refuge for slaves and free Negroes escaping the horrors of nineteenth century living in the United States.<sup>43</sup> Due to the increasingly declining population of Black residents in Mexico post-emancipation in comparison to other ethnic groups, the tendency was to simply overlook the importance that this numerically ‘insignificant’ group had on the economic, social, and political development of New Spain. As a result, the portrayal of slavery in Mexico is diluted to a more politically convenient version of the historical truth. Of course, an analysis of the statistical data available for the colonial era is warranted. As has been demonstrated, what this essentially reveals is that the figures are not conclusive in a significant regards. The elusiveness of the caste system and the difficulty encountered with having to assess a person’s racial classification based purely on skin colour meant there were inevitable cracks in the system, through which many Afro-Mexicans slipped. Passing off as Euro-Mestizo or Indian thus became the strategy of choice in trying to elude colonial authorities, accomplished by bribing the parish priests authorised to register newborns in efforts to achieve upward mobility.<sup>44</sup>

A conservative figure establishes the number of slaves imported into New Spain at around 200,000, although the efficiency of the contraband trade and other

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<sup>43</sup> See J. S. Muhammad, “Mexico and Central America,” in *No Longer Invisible: Afro-Latin Americans Today*, eds. Pedro Pérez-Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, 170–5 (London: Minority Rights Group Publications, 1995).

<sup>44</sup> Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 270.

faults in the documentation system means that there are still debates about the accuracy of such approximations.<sup>45</sup> Colin Palmer notes that “[i]t is difficult to determine the precise number of slaves that arrived in the Indies in general and in New Spain in particular prior to 1650... There is [also] no way of knowing how many slaves reached their destination alive”.<sup>46</sup> Slaves laboured all over the colony in all of the principal sectors, including the mining and textile industries (in Pachuca, Guanajuato, San Luis Potosí, Zacatecas, Mexico City, Puebla, for example), on plantations (mainly in Morelos, Veracruz, and Tabasco) and in households.<sup>47</sup> Thus, the satisfaction of labour needs which arose at the shortage of Indian labour provided the impetus to open the slave trade market in New Spain, whose outcome was to be not as negligible as was traditionally presented. New Spain’s participation in the Atlantic slave trade first originated to satisfy the labour shortage generated by the near annihilation of the Amerindian population upon the arrival of the Spanish due to epidemics fatal to the disease-vulnerable natives.<sup>48</sup> It is, in this light, thankful to the African presence in Mexico that the Indigenous population was allowed to ‘recover’, as best as possible under the comparable circumstances of brutal subordination. The myth of the physical superiority of the African<sup>49</sup> further served to sanction the reliance on African chattel labour, which conveniently appeased Bartolomé de las Casas’ empathy for the Indigenous populations; granted he did not prove to be as staunch an opponent to negro slavery as one might have assumed given his endearing defence of the humanity of the native population.<sup>50</sup> Once Spain was able to benefit from the

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<sup>45</sup> Palmer, *Slaves of the White God*, 2–3.

<sup>46</sup> Palmer, *Slaves of the White God*, 26.

<sup>47</sup> Aguirre Beltrán, *El negro esclavo en Nueva España*, 28.

<sup>48</sup> Palmer, *Slaves of the White God*, 2.

<sup>49</sup> Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 180–5.

<sup>50</sup> Vinson, “La historia del estudio de los negros en México,” 26.

extensiveness of the Portuguese slave trade during the period of political unification between the two European powers,<sup>51</sup> the provision of slave labour to New Spain was practically infallible.

In summary, Blackness has been valuable to Mexico during the various stages of its development as a Spanish colony as well as a purportedly *mestizo* nation. Theories of racial inferiority of the African morally legitimised chattel slavery and further sustained a segregated society along the lines of wealth distribution, political office and representation, and social status during the colonial era. The protracted fight for Independence also encapsulated a sizeable significance of Blackness given the overwhelming participation of Afro-Mexican men in the ranks of leadership and in the body of troops. Historian Ted Vincent documents how the Afro-Mexican insurgent leader José María Morelos y Pavón was most successful in persuading various Black populations to switch sides in the war, which turned out to be a considerable factor for the final victory of the insurgents.<sup>52</sup> Motivated by the vast discontents produced under Spanish, ‘divide-and-conquer’ rule, the yearning for a non-racialised Mexico acted as a catalyst to propel Blacks once aligned with the Spanish to side with the insurgency.<sup>53</sup>

Patrick Carroll concludes in his analysis of colonial Veracruz, the most important slave state based on sugar plantations and sugar mills, that

the correlations race and ethnicity with underprivilege created the spectre of race war, perhaps tinged with class struggle... Creole whites who had grown in power during the middle colonial period and then sacrificed these influences for economic rewards during the later rebirth of the imperial system recoiled for fear that the

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<sup>51</sup> Vaughn, “Race and Nation,” 31.

<sup>52</sup> Theodore G. Vincent, “The Blacks Who Freed Mexico,” *The Journal of Negro History* 79, no. 3 (Summer 1994): 261.

<sup>53</sup> Vincent, “The Blacks Who Freed Mexico,” 260.

undiscriminating rebellious colored masses would consume them too. These powerful racial elites joined hands with imperial forces to put down the popular revolt and to literally kill all but a handful of its national leaders.<sup>54</sup>

From one angle, then, the war for Independence is explainable as an escalation of the race relations of the colonial period, unsustainable despite the rigidity with which the colonial authorities exercised power over the society. As is plainly obvious, race was an important determinant which eclipsed virtually all aspects of the colonial subject's existence, ranging from economic position and social caste<sup>55</sup> to military and/or political participation.

### **3.1 Evaluating colonial data**

When evaluating the archival collections available to the researcher of Afro-Mexican studies, it is important to first and foremost recognise the limitations of the colonial data, either in the case of the official records or the historical interpretations provided by the academics and/or relevant elites during the early years of the Independence period. Ideology is always present at the moment of producing the material the later generations retrieve as historical data, and as such the researcher must consider the context in order to ascertain its utility. As Emma Pérez-Rocha states,

[t]hus, in Mexico, as the 19<sup>th</sup> century elapsed, the tendency regarding the role of the archival document as a primary source was not merely about seeing the intrinsic value in it; the knowledge of ancient and colonial history, principally the former, was

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<sup>54</sup> Patrick James Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz: Race, Ethnicity, and Regional Development* (1999; second edition with new introduction, Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001), 152.

<sup>55</sup> For a discussion about the formation of national society, which saw the disintegration of the colonial caste system give way to the class system, see Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 287–92.

embedded in the ideology of the era, so as to uphold the bases of nationalism and indigenism fully developed afterwards.<sup>56</sup>

Regarding the manipulation or exaggeration of data, the works of the Baron of Humboldt are particularly well-known for minimising the African presence in favour of overestimating the European presence. If we were to solely rely on Humboldt, for example, we would be erroneously led to believe that the African slave presence and the resultant progeny were inconsequential to the racial make-up of colonial Mexico.<sup>57</sup> That is far from the truth of the matter. The idea of race saturated most aspects of colonial Mexico, to the extent that both State (at the federal, state, and municipal levels) and the Catholic Church archives thoroughly demonstrate such as the need to control miscegenation dictated.<sup>58</sup>

Until the 1793 census, the African presence in New Spain was substantially greater than the European.<sup>59</sup> The waning importance of the slave-based economy coupled with an increased European immigration over a short period of time towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century contributed to the changing dynamics in the demographic make-up of the colonial society.<sup>60</sup> “It is therefore undoubted that the population of European origin, like the black, was not capable of sustaining itself and that it forcibly needed the concurrence of a continuous migration in order to persist as a separate

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<sup>56</sup> Emma Pérez-Rocha, “Material de archivo,” in *Aportaciones a la investigación*, 12 [my translation]; “Así, en México, al transcurrir el siglo XIX la tendencia en cuanto al papel del documento de archivo como fuente primaria, no fue sólo el de ver en él su valor intrínseco; el conocimiento de la historia antigua y colonial, principalmente de la primera, estaba enmarcado en la ideología de la época, con el fin de sentar las bases del nacionalismo y el indigenismo desarrollados a plenitud posteriormente.”

<sup>57</sup> Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 197–8.

<sup>58</sup> Vinson, “La historia del estudio de los negros en México,” 33.

<sup>59</sup> Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 223–31.

<sup>60</sup> See, for instance, studies done on Veracruz, especially Carroll, *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz*; and Naveda Chávez-Hita, *Esclavos negros en las haciendas azucareras*.

caste.”<sup>61</sup> This explains why the figures presented below in Table 1 show an inverse relationship between Europeans and Africans after 1793. All in all, Aguirre Beltrán affirms that “colonial Mexico was predominantly black”<sup>62</sup> with respect to the non-native arrivals. Of course, we must almost keep in mind that the indigenous population and its mestizo counterparts always represented – and still do nowadays – the overwhelming majority. Nevertheless, this numerical exaggeration has had considerable impact on the overall, historical perception of colonial Mexico and thus has created a lopsided depiction in an effort to minimise the inherent ugliness associated with slavery.

| Year | Total     | Europeans | Africans | Indigenous | Euro-Mestizos | Afro-Mestizos | Indo-Mestizos |
|------|-----------|-----------|----------|------------|---------------|---------------|---------------|
| 1570 | 3,380,012 | 6,644     | 20,569   | 3,366,860  | 11,067        | 2,437         | 2,435         |
| 1646 | 1,712,615 | 13,780    | 35,089   | 1,269,607  | 168,568       | 116,529       | 109,042       |
| 1742 | 2,477,277 | 9,814     | 20,131   | 1,540,256  | 391,512       | 266,196       | 249,368       |
| 1793 | 3,799,561 | 7,904     | 6,100    | 2,319,741  | 677,458       | 369,790       | 418,568       |
| 1810 | 6,122,354 | 15,000    | 10,000   | 3,676,281  | 1,092,367     | 624,461       | 704,245       |
| 1570 | 100.0     | 0.2       | 0.6      | 98.7       | 0.3           | 0.07          | 0.07          |
| 1646 | 100.0     | 0.8       | 2.0      | 74.6       | 9.8           | 6.8           | 6.0           |
| 1742 | 100.0     | 0.4       | 0.8      | 62.2       | 15.8          | 10.8          | 10.0          |
| 1793 | 100.0     | 0.2       | 0.1      | 61.0       | 17.8          | 9.6           | 11.2          |
| 1810 | 100.0     | 0.2       | 0.1      | 60.0       | 17.9          | 10.1          | 11.5          |

Table 1: Population in New Spain, by castes<sup>63</sup>

Apart from the apparent manipulation or exaggeration of the colonial data, another factor to consider in terms of appropriately situating the Afro-Mexican population is that the census statistics only refer to the slaves and the tribute-paying, free *negros* or

<sup>61</sup> Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 235 [my translation]; “Es por tanto indudable que la población de origen europeo, al igual que la negra, no era capaz de substituirse y que forzosamente necesitaba el concurso de una continua migración para persistir como casta separada.”

<sup>62</sup> Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 198 [my translation]; “[E] México colonial era predominantemente negro.”

<sup>63</sup> Taken from Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 234.

*mulatos*.<sup>64</sup> Hence, the data has no bearing on the number of slaves who were traded by the illegal means of contraband and piracy, arriving at ports apart from those principally regulated to receive African *ébano* (ebony wood), which were Veracruz, Pánuco, and Campeche.<sup>65</sup> The obligation of serving in the militias, pertaining to all persons of African ancestry, whether Black or *Afromestizo*, contributed to the ability of the colonial administrations to maintain census information on the manumitted population.<sup>66</sup> As duly anticipated, the data has no bearing on representing figures related to the fugitive slaves, who presented a considerable problem for the colonial administration; the famed uprising of Yanga, Veracruz at the turn of the seventeenth century indicates such, among other plentiful examples.<sup>67</sup>

On this note, much research has been conducted to document the forms that resistance to slavery took. The establishment of *palenque* communities by runaway rural slaves began practically as early as the enslavement of Africans. In some cases, these maroons were successful in achieving the recognition of the colonial administration and were thus accorded land rights, being the exceptional case of when Blacks were legally permitted to possess land.<sup>68</sup> For instance, the most notorious examples of *palenque* communities in the Costa Chica region are Santo Domingo Armenta and Cuajinicuilapa.<sup>69</sup> In fact, both Aguirre Beltrán and Miguel Ángel Gutiérrez Ávila affirm that what today exists as the identifiably Black communities in

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<sup>64</sup> Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 275.

<sup>65</sup> Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 32.

<sup>66</sup> Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 282–3.

<sup>67</sup> See, for example, Nicolás Ngou-Mve, “El cimarronaje como forma de expresión en el África Bantú en la América colonial: el ejemplo de Yanga en México,” *América Negra* 14 (1997): 27–51.

<sup>68</sup> Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 286.

<sup>69</sup> See Vaughn, “Race and Nation,” 49, citing Laurentino Luna, *La reforma agraria en Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero: micro-historia de una población guerrerense* (Bachelor dissertation, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1975).

the Costa Chica are descendents of the *cimarrones* (fugitive slaves) who succeeded in creating and defending their own settlements.<sup>70</sup>

Apart from violent modes of resistance, ranging from slave plantation uprisings to participation in the Independence war against the European armies, the formation of confraternities (*cofradías*) as an association of mutual assistance to affirm solidarity of Black persons, both slave and free, against the injustices of the colonial system, proved to be both popular and effective.<sup>71</sup> Additionally, the Afro-Mexican *corridos* (folk ballads) of the Costa Chica served – and continue to do so – as a poetic form of the oral culture tradition, simultaneously entertaining while encapsulating the interconnectedness of “history, violence, and self-glorification” as a means of disseminating a distinctively Afro resistance mentality.<sup>72</sup> Paulette Ramsay demonstrates this when she examines the Afro-Mexican *corrido* using the greater panorama of Caribbean oral traditions to provide a point of comparison.<sup>73</sup> Successful resistance to the colonial, slave-based economy did occur, and widely so as Aguirre

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<sup>70</sup> See Miguel Ángel Gutiérrez Ávila, *Corrido y violencia: entre los afroestizos de la Costa Chica de Guerrero y Oaxaca* (Chilpancingo: Universidad Autónoma de Guerrero, 1988). See also John Holmes McDowell, *Poetry and Violence: The Ballad Tradition of Mexico's Costa Chica* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

<sup>71</sup> Palmer, *Slaves of the White God*, 54–55. Also see Nicole Von Germeten, *Black Blood Brothers: Confraternities and Social Mobility for Afro-Mexicans* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006).

<sup>72</sup> Paulette A. Ramsay, “History, Violence, and Self-Glorification in Afro-Mexican *corridos* from Costa Chica de Guerrero,” *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 23, no. 4 (2004): 450. On the theme of self-glorification, Cornel West notes something which drew my attention as an equally applicable reading of the Afro-Mexican context. He states: “A distinctive feature of black styles is a certain projection of the self – more a *persona* – in performance. This is not simply a self-investment and self-involvement in musical, rhetorical, and athletic enactments; it also acknowledges radical contingency and even solicits challenge and danger. In short, it is a spectacular form of risk-ridden execution that is self-imposed – be it a Charlie Parker solo, a Sarah Vaughn rendition, Muhammad Ali footwork, a Martin Luther King, Jr., sermon, a James Brown dancing act, a Julius Erving dunk shot, or a Kathleen Battle interpretation of Handel. This feature not only results from what some anthropologists have called the African deification of accident – the sense of perennially being on a slippery tightrope; it also comes from the highly precarious historical situations in which black people have found themselves. And with political and economic avenues usually blocked, specific cultural arenas become the space wherein black resistance is channelled;” Cornel West, “Black Culture and Postmodernism,” in *A Postmodern Reader*, 395.

<sup>73</sup> See Ramsay, “History, Violence, and Self-Glorification.”

Beltrán claims, serving to both undermine the caste system and also contribute the beginning elements of a Black consciousness in Mexico.<sup>74</sup>

Another issue to consider in contextualising the statistical data available from the colonial era is the phenomenon of defying the caste system, necessitated by the disadvantageous position occupied by the Blacks. Similar to the situation of the emancipated Afro population, the Indigenous were subject to the paying of the tribute, but unlike the descendents of slaves, they were allowed to possess land in collectivities (*ejidos*). This privilege was unattainable to the Black population. As such, the Afro populations were forced to devise strategies in order to overcome the adversity of their lived experiences. A common form of manoeuvring around the rigidity of the caste system was bribing the local parish priests who were authorised to register all newborns, so that Black parents frequently were able to classify their children as either Euro-Mestizo or Indian. The prominent example of the insurgent José María Morelos y Pavón, who was classified as a Euro-Mestizo despite being the son of *mulato pardo*<sup>75</sup> parents, suffices to demonstrate the increasingly porous-like quality of the caste system.<sup>76</sup> As Aguirre Beltrán summarises, “[t]his tendency of the Afro-Mestizo to hide his quality notably influenced in the result of the censuses which in any case should be considered as noting a much smaller number of individuals than in reality existed.”<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> For further reading about how slave societies existed and resisted within colonial societies, see also chapter six entitled “Slavery” in Van den Berghe, *The Ethnic Phenomenon*.

<sup>75</sup> *Mulato pardo* is the racial classification that refers to the miscegenation of the black man and the Indian woman. See Aguirre Beltrán, *La población Negra*, 169.

<sup>76</sup> Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 270–1.

<sup>77</sup> Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 272 [my translation]; “Esta tendencia del fromestizo a ocultar su calidad influyó notablemente en el resultado de los censos que en todos los casos deben ser considerados como anotando un número mucho menor de individuos de los que en realidad existían.”

As demonstrated so far, the colonial data and historical narratives available to the Afro-Mexican researcher must be contextualised and properly evaluated to factor in the aforementioned limitations. The prevailing ideologies of the day notoriously shaped how colonial society was to be represented on paper, as determined by the overriding desires of the dominant culture. The dissolution of the caste system in colonial Mexico at the onset of Independence eventually gave way to the post-Revolution celebration of *mestizaje* and *indigenismo* as the new, progressive strategies to be employed to propel the nation towards its destiny of greatness. This entailed drawing from the best elements of the three races to justify – albeit with the hope that the White would outweigh the others – the outstanding nature of Mexican hybridity, best reflected in Jose Vasconcelos’ concept of the “cosmic race” (“*la raza cósmica*”)<sup>78</sup> which would hopefully be registered as the fifth great race of humankind.<sup>79</sup> Unfortunately, just as *indigenismo* has served to marginalise the Afro element from the indigenous-dominated national discourse, as Bobby Vaughn argues,<sup>80</sup> *mestizaje* “tends to privilege lighter-skinned people while ignoring the ‘continued oppression of darker-skinned peoples as the dominant culture seeks out the familiar (the whiteness) within the other’”.<sup>81</sup> This is precisely the effect of the idea of the “cosmic race”, to be quite plainly observed in the interactions of contemporary Mexican society, as briefly indicated at the beginning of this chapter.

### **3.2 Miscegenation, *mestizaje*, and national identity**

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<sup>78</sup> See José Vasconcelos, *La raza cósmica: misión de la raza iberoamericana* (Barcelona: Agencia Mundial de Librería, 1958).

<sup>79</sup> Vaughn, “Race and Nation,” 41–6.

<sup>80</sup> Vaughn, “Race and Nation,” 111.

<sup>81</sup> Banks, “*Mestizaje* and the Mexican *Mestizo* Self,” 200–1, citing Suzanne Bost, *Mulattas and Mestizas: Representing Mixed Identities in the Americas, 1850 – 2000* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2003), 8.

From the historical overview provided, it is manifest that various factors have influenced the lack of a national consciousness about the African presence in Mexico. The diffusion of African genes throughout the population as a result of miscegenation is significant in that traces of African features in the physical appearance of the Mexican population is notable but not overwhelmingly conspicuous. The following phrase gives evidence to this point: “If we have darker than usual skin, we blame it on the hot sun or on some group of unusually darker indigenous group”.<sup>82</sup> This statement pinpoints the limitations that are placed on the acceptable content of a Mexican national identity. The importance of phenotype is typically a solid pillar in defining racial heritage, and thus a key marker in establishing racial categories that hierarchise society and determine status.<sup>83</sup> However, the significance of African genes is not only visible in skin colour, though the obsession with the colour of one’s skin is particularly telling especially in a society formed upon rigid racial categorisations. Nevertheless, thinking about the differences between the one-drop rule used in the United States to determine Blackness and the more fluid concept of race utilised in Latin America could make an interesting contrast to the idea of *which* racial categorisation is more rigid and exclusionary, and what the implications would be for the intent on distinguishing a Black identity as separable from (though still a part of) Mexican identity.<sup>84</sup>

Arguably so, the U.S. approach does not leave a great deal of manoeuvring for juggling multiple identities, which is key to Mexican society where an enormous deal of interracial mixing has occurred. However, it is important to note that, as has been

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<sup>82</sup> Lorenzo Covarrubias, “Mexico Fails to Acknowledge Its *Los Negros* History,” *Daily Nexus* 81, no. 87, February 28, 2001, <http://www.dailynexus.com/article.php?a=518> (accessed May 4, 2007).

<sup>83</sup> Banks, “*Mestizaje* and the Mexican *Mestizo* Self,” 204–5.

<sup>84</sup> Banks, “*Mestizaje* and the Mexican *Mestizo* Self,” 200, 203–4.

demonstrated in chapter one, Blackness is not exclusively defined endogenously but historically has been subjected to exogenous defining factors. In this way, the lack of manoeuvring space is not necessarily an imposition of Blacks towards Blacks that overlooks particularities in favour of a cosmopolitan view of a transcendental Blackness, as a Mexican for whom the appeal to an Afro-Mexican identity sounds at best an effort to further fragment the cohesiveness of the Mexican national identity might critique. Rather, it must be understood that racial identity is usually defined in the face of opposition and oppression. So the role of the domineering ‘other’ determining the identity of the group also plays a significant part in the way these models are constructed and in this case, the rejection of even a drop of Black blood as an impure element to be contained by grouping all the ‘infected ones’ under a single label despite palpable variations. The application of the U.S. model in Mexico to determine the question of ‘who is Black’ would be cyclical in approach, though; for even the colonising Spanish were of a mixed heritage, having Moorish (and thus African) ancestry themselves.

The fluid racial concept more typical in Latin America causes the opposite to take place, though the effects can be similar in that the melting pot itself is emphasised in expense of the actual components that form it.<sup>85</sup> In this case, the reality of Black Mexico is more easily ignored because of an emphasis on the end product at the expense of the process. The dispensable can be (and has been) reduced to nothingness, for the sake of a more holistic approach that supposedly embraces the complexities of defining Mexican national identity. The challenge is finding a balance between adequately emphasising the Mexican reality of pluralism while

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<sup>85</sup> Banks, “*Mestizaje and the Mexican Mestizo Self*,” 199–204.

celebrating the imports of all significant contributions to not only the pluralism but to the *product* of this plural reality.

Unfortunately, the formation of Mexico's national identity, with antecedents in the colonial period, did not meet this detailed challenge. Instead, the colonial caste system would be employed to categorise residents according to the race of one's parents and one's own phenotype, thus increasing confusion as categories overlapped and were arbitrarily assigned. Additionally, the category of 'African' disappeared after the 1753 census, and thus it is assumed by historians that racial and cultural assimilation had been virtually completed so as to justify the insistence in once-independent Mexico on the political doctrine of *mestizaje* between the European and Indian.<sup>86</sup>

Here, a grave mistake would lie in assuming that *mestizaje* is a compromising way of diluting racial divisions and creating an oneness out of difference, for this would be an assertion that ridicules and detaches the concept from its historical development during the colonial period. A convincing analysis in the face of a celebratory acceptance of the *mestizaje* doctrine as integral to the formation of Mexican identity is eloquently set forth by Taunya Lovell Banks. She argues that the very creation of the caste system in New Spain by the Spanish colonisers, which looked to classify the offspring resultant from miscegenation, has an anti-Black bias that became inherent to the concept of *mestizaje*, as taken up and reinforced in the post-Independence period when the Mexican nation was being moulded. This caste system was more favourable to Indians and those of Indian descent than those of

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<sup>86</sup> Banks, "*Mestizaje and the Mexican Mestizo Self*," 212.

African, allocating to the Indians a higher socio-economic status.<sup>87</sup> By all means, highlighting the differential treatment of Indian and African is not to minimise the horrors that the Indigenous peoples experienced at the hands of the colonizers; the employment of the term '*gente de razón*' ('people of reason') is but one example to demonstrate that this 'favour' was nothing to boast about, for instance.<sup>88</sup> Even still, this system produced a tendency of persons to deny African ancestry in attempts to better integrate into New Spanish society and consequently receive the greater benefits associated with this assimilation.<sup>89</sup> The tendency to deny was also justified to avoid the social and legal stigma attached to being Black, a stigma that depicted slavery as inextricably linked to Blackness, despite the persistent presence of *free* Blacks and the maroon communities established on the coasts in the early colonial period.<sup>90</sup>

Of course, the European mechanism of psychological manipulation did emphasize the 'white is right' and 'white is better' ideas that lie at the heart of why the 'lightening up' of a national identity is preferred. Indeed, Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas, the published Afro-Mexican scholar currently teaching in North Carolina, argues just how this colonial, racist logic of belittling the Black person continued during the formative years of the Revolution.<sup>91</sup> Nevertheless, miscegenation has had the effect of blinding the focus of Mexican consciousness to the visibility, or invisibility, of Blackness. Patrick Carroll, another historian who has written and

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<sup>87</sup> Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 271–5.

<sup>88</sup> Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 158–9.

<sup>89</sup> Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 277–92.

<sup>90</sup> Banks, "*Mestizaje and the Mexican Mestizo Self*," 212–4.

<sup>91</sup> See Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas, "The Erasure of the Afro Element of *Mestizaje* in Modern Mexico: The Coding of Visibly Black *Mestizos* according to a White Aesthetic in and through the Discourse on Nation during the Cultural Phase of the Mexican Revolution, 1920 – 1968" (PhD dissertation, University of British Columbia, 2001).

researched extensively on colonial Veracruz, also emphasises how the concept of *mestizaje*, as embodied in Vasconcelos' *raza cósmica*, completely obscures the outstanding contribution that Black Africans made to the mixing of races which produced the bulk of *mestizo* Mexico.<sup>92</sup>

Likewise, retouching on the slavery machinery, in addition to the diversity of African tribes united together by a sole function, the very destruction of any remnant, manifestation or observation of African culture was the strategy at practice. As a result, the idea of a Black consciousness was severely prejudiced. In essence, the Black person was thoroughly integrated into the construct of Mexican society, not to the extent that an Afromexican culture does not exist but in terms of how the African widely replicated New Spain social practices as opposed to the Indian. Indeed, Aguirre Beltrán argues that the Indian failed to become part of national society in contrast to the Black person who did not resist integration.<sup>93</sup> These historic factors are very relevant to the hypothesis of anthropologist Bobby Vaughn that the *indigenismo-mestizaje* ideology that forms Mexican national identity has systematically discarded the third root because of an emphasis on the pre-Hispanic indigenous civilizations as embodying the essence of Mexicanness that is too extensive to allow space for this addition.<sup>94</sup> As a result, coupled with the evident diffusion of African genes and the process of acculturation as imperative to the workings of Spanish colonialism, the third root is only recently being recognised as legitimate.

Despite the 'pessimistic' analysis offered by those academics who claim the complete acculturation of the African person into American society, the endeavours of

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<sup>92</sup> Patrick James Carroll, "Los mexicanos negros, el mestizaje y los fundamentos olvidados de la 'raza cósmica': una perspectiva regional," *Historia Mexicana* 44, no. 3 (1995): 404.

<sup>93</sup> Aguirre Beltrán, *La población negra*, 279–80.

<sup>94</sup> Vaughn, "Race and Nation," 28–46.

the rejuvenation in Afro-Mexican studies have been to ‘prove’ how surviving ‘Africanisms’ are visible in Mexican national culture. The debate over whether we can genuinely classify the contributions of the Black person in Mexico to an ‘African’ culture or not, and so better said to a ‘slave culture’, is beyond the purpose of this thesis. What can be undeniably affirmed is that a *Black* culture most certainly exists in Mexico, having been created, transmitted, and modified all the while by persons of African ancestry who formed communities and are now identifiable as the descendents of *cimarrones*. The final undeniable point to be stressed is that the historical negation of the Black subject has led to the retarded growth of Black consciousness. As the analysis provided in this chapter has shown, the ideology of mestizaje has failed in two fundamental ways: (a) to genuinely create a unified, de-racialised society which exalts difference in sameness (as will be further argued in the following chapter); and (b) to allow for the reconstruction of Blackness given the continuation of the anti-Black vestige inherited from the racist colonial formulation. These failings fermented into a situation which currently is being transformed by the contours of a burgeoning Black identity politics.