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Mexico and "Nuestra tercera raíz" : ideology, history identity and two towns of Veracruz

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

MEXICO AND *NUESTRA TERCERA RAÍZ*:

IDEOLOGY, HISTORY, IDENTITY

AND TWO TOWNS OF VERACRUZ

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

AFRICAN NEW WORLD STUDIES

by

Richard Fantina

2003

To: Dean R. Bruce Dunlap
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Richard Fantina, and entitled *Mexico and Nuestra Tercera Raíz: Ideology, History, Identity, and Two Towns of Veracruz*, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Tometro Hopkins

James Sweet

Jean Muteba Rahier, Major Professor

Date of Defense: June 19, 2003

The thesis of Richard Fantina is approved.

Dean R. Bruce Dunlap
College of Arts and Sciences

Dean Douglas Wartzok
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2003

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DEDICATION

To Tometro Hopkins

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I have found my coursework throughout the program to be stimulating and thought-provoking, providing me with the tools with which to explore both past and present ideas and issues.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS
MEXICO AND *NUESTRA TERCERA RAÍZ*:
IDEOLOGY, HISTORY, IDENTITY
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by

Richard Fantina

Florida International University, 2003

Miami, Florida

Professor Jean Muteba Rahier, Major Professor

The thesis contributed to the growing body of knowledge and discourse on the African presence in Mexico. Long underresearched, Afromexican studies today command the attention of some of Mexico's foremost historians and anthropologists. This thesis focused on some of their ideas and gave a general overview of the history of people of African descent in Mexico, particularly in the state of Veracruz, the port of entry for most of New Spain's African slaves. Drawing on the work of these Afromexicanista scholars, this thesis demonstrated how their ideas intersect, and sometimes differ with, traditional scholarship in this neglected area. The elusive question of defining blackness within the national discourse of *mestizaje* formed part of the discussion. *Mestizaje* traditionally refers to the racial mixture of Europeans and indigenous Americans. Recent efforts seek to broaden the concept of *mestizaje* to include the descendants of Africans. Finally, this thesis reported on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in two Afromexican towns in Veracruz, Yanga and El Coyolillo, which have widely divergent attitudes toward the concept of blackness.

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I. Introduction

This study is based on the five months I spent working in the state of Veracruz, Mexico in the winter, spring and summer of 2002. It was a homecoming of sorts for me. I had spent several years in Mexico in the 1970s and have retained a deep love of the country and its people. In those years, I studied at the Universidad de las Americas in Cholula, Puebla. On this more recent occasion, I spent most of my time in Xalapa, the state capital of Veracruz. While there, I worked with two noted *Afromexicanistas* (as scholars on Afromexico call themselves), Adriana Naveda-Chávez-Hita, a historian, and Alfredo Martínez Maranto, an anthropologist. Naveda provided an excellent overview of the history of Afromexico. Martínez Maranto provided a background in Mexican anthropology and also accompanied me on field trips to the Afromexican town of Coyolillo, a short distance from Xalapa. In addition, I made several excursions to the historic Afromexican town of Yanga. During my months in Mexico I became familiar with the work of many Afromexicanistas, most of whose work is unavailable in English. I suspected that many North American students of Afromexico were unfamiliar with most of this great body of work. This impression was seconded by Naveda as she remarked that many North American scholars arrive in Mexico with only a rudimentary knowledge of Spanish and with a general ignorance of the work of the Afromexicanistas. There are exceptions to this, of course, such as Colin Palmer, Patrick Carroll, Laura Lewis, Ben Vinson III, and Bobby Vaughan, to name a few. But as a relative newcomer to studies of Afromexico, I was determined from the beginning not to base my knowledge solely on what I had learned from North American sources or the few works that have been translated into English.

Over the course of the months spent in Mexico, I gained the impression by reading the work of many of the Afromexicanistas that the concept of *mestizaje* is very much alive in Mexico. I do not mean to suggest that there is a universal embrace of *mestizaje*

among Afromexicanistas because several of them categorically reject the concept's premises. But on the whole the hegemony of mestizaje pervades much of their work. Because this concept remains so controversial, I will devote attention to the debates surrounding it in the pages that follow. It is generally agreed that there is no single grand narrative of mestizaje, that its meaning and significance floats according to the place and space to which it is applied. Mexico may have been the first nation to officially embrace mestizaje as an ideology of national identity. Indeed, mestizaje has ideological roots in the Porfiriata, the corrupt, thirty-five year regime of Porfirio Diaz. It was during this era that government-supported Mexican intellectuals first began to accept the reality of their nation's racial mixture (excluding the African element, to be sure). But from its beginnings in the 19th Century, Mexican mestizaje has evolved, in fits and starts, from prerevolutionary formulations to the idea of the "cosmic race" of revolutionary philosopher José Vasconcelos, through a progression that found expression in the proclamation of *Nuestra Tercera Raíz* in the 1980s which actively sought to recognize and celebrate the African contributions to Mexican culture. While acknowledging that official mestizaje has not lived up to its promises especially in regard to Mexico's indigenous populations, it has attempted to remain broad enough to belatedly grant legitimacy to Afromexican history. Largely because of this embrace of *Nuestra Tercera Raíz*, it can be hoped that, as an ideology of national identity, Mexican mestizaje is not immutable and as it strives to incorporate notions of blackness, it will also address its serious lapses *vis a vis* the indigenous population. After an examination of the intellectual legacy of Mexican mestizaje, the cultural and educational initiative that was *Nuestra Tercera Raíz* will be discussed.

This thesis also presents a historical overview of the African presence in Mexico from the point of view of the Afromexicanistas. Nearly all these scholars are white or mestizo. As such, it is important to keep in mind that their research and comments on

Afromexico are necessarily the voices of relative outsiders. Except for some incipient organizing taking place in La Costa Chica (coastal Oaxaca and Guerrero), there does not appear to be any coherent group of individuals who presently speak with an “authentic” Afromexican voice. This limitation must be kept in mind in reviewing the comments of the Afromexicanistas presented below. While the motivations of these scholars, and of the many mestizo artists and musicians who have also begun to celebrate Afromexico, cannot be seriously questioned, it remains a possibility that when and if Afromexicans themselves begin to speak out on these political and cultural issues a considerably different interpretation and perspective may be presented. The present situation may be roughly analogous to some political and cultural efforts in the U.S. in the days before the Black Power movement of the 1960s and ‘70s. Many scholars and activists promoting the black cause in America in those days were white progressives and because of their self-consciously good intentions, they were shocked when groups like SNCC began excluding them from the dialogue. It was felt that despite their good intentions their voices were inauthentic and therefore irrelevant. While I am not suggesting that the work of the Afromexicanistas is in any way irrelevant, it is nevertheless possible that more “authentic” voices will eventually revise and reinterpret many of the ideas of these scholars. A mestiza poet and musician and strong supporter of an Afromexican cultural revival, warned me when I expressed a desire to attend the *Encuentro de los pueblos Afromexicanos* in La Costa Chica in 2002, that perhaps I should stay away because white and mestizo supporters were openly resented at the previous year’s conference. (Tellingly, perhaps, this musician planned to go because she claimed to be a recognized “friend” and I thought of those white progressive “friends” of the blacks in the U.S. in the 1960s.) So a backlash of sorts may already be under way.

The general impression I have formed of the Afromexicanista scholars, however, is not that they pretend to speak for Afromexicans. Most of them, despite their progressive

opinions, present their work dispassionately as historical or anthropological scholarship. Some say frankly that, outside of La Costa Chica, there is a relatively negligible contemporary Afromexican population, or at least one that is likely to present itself as such anytime soon. So they are not attempting to assume leadership positions over a subaltern group aiming to be recognized. At times, the enthusiasm that these scholars demonstrate for the qualities of Afromexicans past and present amounts, perhaps inadvertently, to an Othering that can be seen as a replication of racist discourse, though in a benign form. Writing of some Argentine depictions of indigenous peoples, Gastón Gordillo and Silvia Hirsh write: “Even though some of these representations contained exoticizing and racist assumptions about these groups’ ‘otherness,’ they also triggered public debates that set the ground for new struggles” (2003: 19). This comment can be applied with some justice to certain of the writings of the Afromexicanistas with regard to their subjects. While it may lack an “authenticity” and occasionally reflect an unconscious racial Othering, the work of the Afromexicanistas has helped to inform public debates and give recognition to Mexico’s African heritage.

Traditionally, many of the best Mexican scholars who have devoted themselves to historical or anthropological research have done so by addressing the nation’s incredibly rich indigenous heritage. It almost seems that for many, before *Nuestra Tercera Raíz*, there was nowhere else to go. In addition, many scholars may have felt a kind of intellectual “fatigue” after addressing indigenous questions for so long (Alcantara, interview). The initiative to research Afromexico opened up an original field of inquiry for scholars and presented exciting new possibilities.

I will touch on some of the important ideas developed by these scholars. (The translations in this thesis are, in most cases, my own.) All of the Afromexicanistas owe an intellectual debt to the work of Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, who pioneered studies of Afromexico in the 1940s and 50s. It is not too much to say that nearly everything

written in the field is based upon Aguirre Beltrán's work. But even before him, historians noted the Mexican preoccupation with themes of blackness. The *casta* paintings of the 18th century provide an illustration of this preoccupation. A section of this thesis is devoted to this singular Mexican art. In addition, the broad outlines of the history of Africans and their descendants is presented. Some of the points made by Afromexicanista historians remain debated by many North American and European scholars. In recounting the history of African slavery, some Afromexicanistas exhibit a Hispanophilia that Anglophilic historiography in North America has tried to disparage. A true reading likely lies somewhere between the two extremes of Hispanophilia and Anglophilic. However, it remains important to understand the roots of current Mexican historiography and the cultural legacy that informs it.

After a historical overview, I will report on my visits to both Coyolillo and Yanga and include a discussion of the popularity and influence of the heavily African-influenced genres of *danzon* and *jarocho* music in Xalapa and throughout the state of Veracruz. Martínez Maranto, in "Dios Pinta Como Quiere," (1994) has written the definitive study of the contemporary population of Coyolillo. His help was invaluable to me when I visited the town. In addition, a sociologist, Annabella Cruz, shared some of her research with me which also helped enormously. When I traveled to Yanga, I quickly made the acquaintance of the local priest, Padre Toni, and the curator of the town library, Andres Martínez Maceda. I also met the mayor and several former mayors. I interviewed several people affiliated with Yanga's annual festival celebrating the town's namesake and historic liberator, the African "prince," Yanga. In the pages that follow his story will be recounted. The people of Coyolillo have predominantly African phenotypical features. Yet, they deny that they are black. "They say we're black, but we're not black," (*Dicen somos negros pero no somos negros*) confided one respondent (qtd. by Annabella Cruz, 2002). In contrast, the people of Yanga present a

phenotypically mestizo appearance, as the original black population has been “absorbed” over the centuries. Yet, nearly every person from Yanga whom I interviewed, claimed some “black blood” in his or her veins. So we see the contrast between “black” people claiming not to be black, and “white” or “brown” people claiming to be black. I will discuss some cultural and historical reasons why this anomaly may exist.

II. Mestizaje

The notions of mestizaje in their many manifestations throughout Latin America have been attacked as racist constructions by progressive scholars in recent decades. In many cases, these critiques cannot be disputed. In too many nations, mestizaje has been used by an elite to justify its own power and to attempt to degrade citizens who do not conform to a racial ideal. Mestizaje, in theory, celebrates the mixing of races, but too often it has been used by a mestizo elite who generally bases its worldview on its Creole and Spanish or Portuguese predecessors. While purporting to recognize the mixing of races (European, indigenous, African, and Asian) that occurred through colonial contact, proponents of mestizaje have usually demonstrated a distinct Eurocentric bias. It is primarily because of this bias that progressive scholars have so thoroughly critiqued the concept of mestizaje as an ideology of national identity. While I cannot claim to be an expert on the ways in which mestizaje has been imagined and enacted throughout Latin America, in this thesis I will try to explain why I believe that its Mexican incarnation, despite many serious flaws, remains capable of renewal and may someday live up to its promises of inclusion. The recent efforts by Mexican intellectuals to rediscover the African roots of their nation's heritage represent positive developments and if an atmosphere of inclusion develops out of their endeavors it can only benefit those who have felt the most maligned by official mestizaje, Mexico's large indigenous minority. That remains to be seen but because this essay deals primarily with the African presence in Mexico, these large indigenous communities remain outside of my focus of study. Because of the continuing relevance of indigenous concerns, some introductory remarks on mestizaje are necessary.

The ideological origins of mestizaje are products of 19th century pseudo-scientific formulations, which owe an intellectual debt to Social Darwinist ideas promulgated primarily by Herbert Spencer but also by other European thinkers like Gobineau,

Chamberlain, and Galton. In general the Social Darwinists decried miscegenation as the road to doom for healthy civilizations. The early ideologues of mestizaje attempted to answer Social Darwinist dictums of the survival of the fittest by turning some of these ideas on their heads. Only *through* miscegenation, they asserted, could a nation become healthy. Instead of agreeing that the “purer” the race the stronger the nation, spokespersons for mestizaje made a virtue of necessity and insisted that the opposite was true, that a nation’s strength lies in the physical and cultural mixing of the races that comprise its population. Spokespersons for mestizaje celebrated a supposed new racial order that developed as a result of European contact resulting from colonialism and the slave trade. For Gilberto Freyre of Brazil, the reality of the mix of African and Portuguese, led him to proclaim this as a benefit to the nation and to, quite illogically, call Brazil a “racial democracy.” For José Vasconcelos, the *mestizo*, the mix of European and Indian, represents the “cosmic race” of the future, an important intellectual formulation in the foundation of the modern nation-state of Mexico. In both Brazil and Mexico, these optimistic national prescriptions ignored the fact of the greater diversity that exists in both nations. In Brazil this led to a slighting of the indigenous contribution, and in Mexico it not only ignored, but consciously downplayed the African contribution, and tried to make a monolithic unity out of the great diversity of the indigenous populations that live within Mexico’s borders.

A point worth remembering about Vasconcelos, however, is that his vision of the “cosmic race,” while it seems naïve today, was, in his conception of it, inclusive. In his historical discussion, in which he tries to prove that race-mixing has always been beneficial, he points to the second empire of ancient Egypt. Vasconcelos writes that the “white” Egyptian first empire had become decadent and that it needed blacks (*la penetración negra*) from Sub-Saharan Africa to revitalize it in the second empire. He elaborates:

The epoch of the second empire formed a new race, *mestiza*, with characteristics mixed of black and white. This era produced the second empire, more advanced and flourishing than the first. The age that produced the pyramids and Egyptian civilization at its zenith, was a *mestiza* age. (1983: 8).

Vanconcelos writes in the final paragraph of *La Raza Cosmica* of “the four great contemporary races: the white, the red, the black, and the yellow,” and that America is “the home of all and it needs them all” (1983: 50).

Vasconcelos’s ideas have been debated for decades. In the U.S. some Chicanos reject the idea of mestizaje. According to Roberto Rodriguez: “Mestizaje is a MYTH as is the concept of the cosmic race. Mexico is an indigenous country” (Rodriguez). Writing of the European presence in Mexico, Rodriguez states: “Rather than mestizaje, a rape occurred.” Victor Mejia, another Chicano writer, essentially agrees with Rodriguez when he writes, “Mestizaje is nothing to be proud of. It is a damaging concept that—like everything else from the Conquest—has served to crush our indigenous heritage and our dignity” (Mejia). Rodriguez and Mejia represent one school of Chicano thinking on the subject which insists, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, that Mexico is a purely “indigenous country.”

Other Chicanos, including lesbian poet, Gloria Andalzúa, represent another view which finds mestizaje inclusive rather than exclusive and she names Vasconcelos as an intellectual forerunner. Leslie Bary has written a compelling analysis of Andalzúa’s *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). Bary points out that for Andalzúa, the appeal of mestizaje lies in its view of miscegenation and cultural hybridity “as spiritual advances and not signs of decay” and that “*La raza cósmica* was important in one of its original historical contexts, that of resistance to neocolonial domination” (1991). It is important to remember that Mexican mestizaje developed in the aftermath

of territorial aggression by the United States, “the colossus of the North,” which repeatedly attacked Mexico when it was riven by internal strife, and succeeded in appropriating half of the country’s land mass. The Mexican Revolution, a true social revolution, was in both a reaction to neocolonial domination by the U.S. and an effort to reconcile the nation’s internal contradictions and achieve a more equitable society. Vasconcelos, who served as minister of education in one of the early revolutionary governments, was both anti-Anglo and anti-U.S. and he gives voice to this repeatedly in his writing. While recognizing that “such affirmations [of hybridity] are subversive in the context of white supremacy, which depends on strict racial divisions and fears amalgamation,” Bary points to “problems inherent” in “the unexamined acceptance of the ‘hybridity’ concept” (1991). Bary writes of Andalzúa’s interest in Vasconcelos for his “‘inclusivity’ (as opposed to white America’s ideology of racial purity) and his defense of hybrid being as superior, rather than inferior” (1991). Yet Bary faults Andalzúa’s reliance on mestizaje because: “Even if we justify it, as is possible in some of its contexts, as a form of ‘strategic’ essentialism, its flaws are serious enough to call into question the implications of its use.” The main problem, according to Bary, is that: “[H]ybridity and liminality as models for counterhegemonic identities fossilize all too easily into new unities, and that this privileging of hybridity and liminality as universalized theoretical concepts may gloss over the telling of specific histories” (1991). This remark underlines a basic defect in the concept of mestizaje as an ideology of national identity, yet whether this is a fatal flaw remains open to interpretation. If mestizaje does remain either frozen or “fossilized,” then to be sure, it cannot be redeemed. However, if as some Afromexicanistas seem to believe, mestizaje is a living and evolving concept, then it contains within itself the means for its own revitalization.

Bary’s comments highlight the contradictions that were conceived along with the very concept of mestizaje. The basic problem for the founders of the doctrines of

mestizaje lies in their acceptance of the premises of the now-discredited pseudo-science of the 19th century. As Alan Knight points out, “The heyday of European racist thought—dated from approximately 1850-1920—roughly coincided with Mexico’s phase of liberal state-building” (78). These pervasive ideas were part of the very air that intellectuals of that era breathed, so even those “state-builders” with good intentions, such as revolutionaries like Vasconcelos, could hardly help but be tainted by these concepts. So any acknowledgment of an intellectual debt to mestizaje, must keep in mind its very specific limitations.

As a consequence of these limitations, ideas of mestizaje have been rightly criticized by scholars, especially some from North American and Europe. Jean Muteba Rahier gives voice to a central complaint against mestizaje when he writes:

Mestizaje, mulataje, and other notions of “race” and cultural mixings have played a central role in “official” and hegemonic imaginations of Latin American and Caribbean national identities from the end of the 19th Century on to the 21st. These ideologies of national identities have usually downplayed the importance of contemporary racism by proclaiming the myth of “racial democracy.” At the same time, they have marginalized and/or marked as Others the individuals and communities that do not fit the prototypical imagined hybridized identities. (2003: 42)

Rahier’s critique is especially cogent when he writes of “a certain trend in North American and European postmodern scholarly discourse that focuses on *métissage*, creolization, hybridity, and other concepts that evoke cross-cultural movements and fertility” (2003: 40) and celebrates these formulations as almost ends in themselves. One of postmodernism’s “jobs,” after all, is to celebrate hybridity wherever it finds it and mestizaje seems to fit neatly into this task. (And while it would be unfair to suggest that Andalúza’s project is self-consciously “postmodern” for its own sake, it can be seen to

fall within this framework, but at the same time it represents an effort to adapt mestizaje to a liberatory end.) However, as Rahier points out, “[F]rom the perspective of Latin Americanist scholars, this intellectual fashion for celebrating cultural and ‘racial’ mixings tends to obfuscate the oppressive ideological realities and histories of the societies that they study” (2003). Rahier cites the work of Norman Whitten, Robin Sheriff and others, who disagree with the “postmodernist celebration” of mestizaje. Yet, though Latin Americanists, these scholars also are generally from North America and Europe and bring a different perspective to the debates. While I cannot claim familiarity with native constructions of mestizaje throughout Latin America, I have tried in these pages, to examine mestizaje from the point of view of Mexican scholars and encountered several who share the approach of Rahier, Whitten, et al. However, most of these Afromexicanistas seem to accept some form of mestizaje as a *fait accompli*, a fact that their nation lives each day, without subscribing to either the traditional racialist view or the current celebratory postmodern view.

Whitten writes of a critic of his own work who asks,

whether a North American scholar has sufficient sensitivity to the ideology (or in some cases cosmology) of mestizaje—especially in its Mexican revolutionary-egalitarian spirit as allegedly explicated by José Vasconcelos (e.g. 1989)—or whether we gringos are prone to succumb to the romance of “multiculturalism.” (2003: 74)

Whitten remains aware of this criticism but defends his position when he writes,

If canonical icons of universalism such as Vasconcelos (to whom I often turn to make sure I am accurate as to his position[s] vis-à-vis *la raza cósmica*) suffer deconstruction in the process, then perhaps we may learn to peer beyond the melting-pot assumptions of doctrinaire mestizaje. (2003: 75)

Whitten is correct to deconstruct “doctrinaire mestizaje” yet the greater part of his experience (and Rahier’s) has been in Ecuador. Official and theoretical mestizaje varies from one country to the next depending in large part on the realities on the ground. My point here is that mestizaje cannot be universalized, that its Mexican variant dealt much more effectively (though still with serious lapses) with realities than the mestizajes of other Latin American nations. Writing of Ecuador, Whitten refers to the “mestizaje/multiculturalidad polarity” (2003: 75) and how today the “space of mestizaje is being confronted constantly by that of multiculturalism” (2003: 65) and that mestizaje “competes with multiculturalism in many spaces and arenas” (2003: 71). But as Bary notes of the Mexican variety of mestizaje: “To be fair to Vasconcelos, we must recognize that *La raza cósmica* in its happier moments is an attempt to formulate a program that looks like what is now called multiculturalism” (1991). If one is inclined to be generous to Vasconcelos, one could say that while he was no visionary, at least he was groping toward a vision of a just society but was limited by the intellectual parameters of his time.

Charles Hale’s critique of mestizaje goes further, perhaps, than those of Rahier and Whitten. Hale writes of “cynical dominating actors, who profess goodwill as a smokescreen for intentions to maintain power as usual” and indeed he provides examples of some Guatemalan intellectuals who, invoking mestizaje, support the status quo and oppose Maya demands for autonomy (1999). Hale describes how the discourse of “U.S.-based literary and cultural theory” has been appropriated by these intellectuals to celebrate a spurious hybridity and ridicule Maya yearnings for self-determination. It is truly an unhappy development that some postmodernist theories can so readily serve the interests of an elite. (This is an almost logical result of so much of postmodernism’s self-consciously “apolitical” stance. See Frederic Jameson 1992, and Ziauddin Sardar 1997). For nearly half a century, since the U.S. CIA sponsored the overthrow of the

liberal Arbenz regime in 1954, Guatemalan governments of the minority mestizo elites have waged a genocidal war against the majority Maya. In the tenuous truce that exists today, Hale rightly condemns attempts by “ideologues who contribute directly to Guatemalan state efforts to eliminate the Maya people by assimilating them to the dominant ladino or mestizo society” (1999). In this view, the cultural battle to impose a mestizo identity on indigenous people amounts to an extension of civil war by other means, cultural rather than physical genocide.

And while Mexico has a “revolutionary” tradition absent in Guatemala, it too continues to grapple, though with far less bloodshed, with the problem of its indigenous minorities of which the Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas is only the most apparent manifestation. According to Gabriela Vargas-Cetina, indigenous activists are rejecting official mestizaje in ever greater numbers and she notes that anthropologists “are being asked by indigenous populations to participate with them in the construction of essentialist portraits of their cultures and societies” (2003). Viewing mestizaje’s concept of hybridity as, at best, a pious fraud, indigenous spokespersons are proclaiming an essentialism and calling on scholars to either support them in this or to get out of their way. This presents specific problems for anthropologists. As Vargas-Cetina puts it:

Anthropology has engaged, for at least two decades, in the critique of essentialist representation; at the same time, indigenous people are using essentialism as a key political tool in their fight to preserve their cultural identity and their access and control of land and other resources. Therefore, we find ourselves torn between the demands of our discipline and the demands of the people we work with in the field. (2003)

Clearly, this strategic essentialism is in part a reaction to the brand of mestizaje that Hale so eloquently critiques.

Hale's comments cast serious doubts on *mestizaje* as it is imagined by segments of the Guatemalan elite. But the case of Mexico cannot be conflated with that of its southern neighbor. It is important to keep in mind what even Whitten refers to as the "Mexican revolutionary-egalitarian spirit" (2003: 74), a spirit that is not part of Guatemala's tradition. Mexico's recent history of mestizo-indigenous relations has been far less bloody than that of Guatemala. Despite the serious, decade-long strife in Chiapas and unrest in the Yucatan, most observers would probably agree that the Mexican government has acted with a restraint that would have been unthinkable in Guatemala throughout most of its history or even in Mexico just a few decades ago. As an example of a Guatemalan spokesman for *mestizaje*, Hale points to Mario Roberto Morales who he describes as "novelist, literary critic, former leftist," and quotes him as calling for "a deepening of *mestizaje*, such that in this country's future there will be no Indians nor ladinos, but only Guatemalans" (1999). I would like to compare the comments of Morales, an establishment Guatemalan intellectual, to those of Carlos Fuentes, also a "novelist, literary critic, former leftist," who occupies a similar privileged position in Mexico. In 1994 Fuentes sent an open letter to Subcomandante Marcos, leader of the Chiapas rebellion in which he wrote:

The Chiapas uprising has provoked fierce reactions in the Mexican media. I have heard people say, "The Indians are an obstacle to progress and modernity." The inevitable corollary is "They should be exterminated."... You have come to remind us that our modernity includes you. Not as an imitation of us but as yourselves, as what you are. The indigenous cultures of Mexico might be destined to disappear in the larger process of *mestizaje*. But until that happens, if it does happen, and while it unfolds, we must respect cultures that are ours because they live with us, proffering values that are possibly superior and doubtless

necessary, to enrich our diminished ideas of modernity and progress.

(1996: 125)

Fuentes's comments, while still holding on to some of the archaic promises of traditional mestizaje, express a doubt and a willingness to engage those who reject its premises, a position unacceptable to many of his counterparts in Guatemala. Fuentes's remarks, which criticize Marcos for resorting to violence in the first place, nevertheless see the necessity for a dialogue which represents a desire for the conciliation of disparate groups and embodies, perhaps, the best hope for the future of Mexico. His letter highlights the differences in the mestizajes as imagined in Mexico and other nations, in this case Guatemala. These sentiments, coming from the nation's most celebrated novelist and a former official of the government, demonstrate that mestizaje in Mexico, at least in the view of Fuentes, has not atrophied. While this perspective may have some elements of reformism and paternalism it displays a good will that is totally lacking in the Guatemalan statements quoted by Hale.

And while some Mexican intellectuals, Fuentes among them, may still long for the absorption of the Indian within the cosmic race, none of the Afromexicanista scholars, as far as I am aware, hold such a view. Mestizaje in Mexico, as in Guatemala, has traditionally dealt primarily with the mix of the European and the indigenous populations, but far more successfully despite continuing defects. Because of Mexico's small modern black population, it is only recently, through the project of *Nuestra Tercera Raíz*, that Mexican mestizaje has become concerned with the nation's African heritage. But despite this positive development, the shortcomings of Mexican mestizaje need to be addressed and, rather than trash the entire concept, corrected. The Afromexicanistas represent one hope that this concept can be so corrected.

If, as it appears, an intellectual movement, *Nuestra Tercera Raíz*, has emerged which embraces the inclusive aspects of mestizaje while rejecting its racialist legacy, a

parallel might be drawn to the concepts of *creolité* and *creolization*. The former represents a movement toward a goal which includes “whitening” and “improving the race,” while the latter celebrates a non-hierarchical diversity. We can, perhaps, refer to Mestizaje (with a capital “M”), the old racist concept as akin to *creolité*, and mestizaje (in democratic lower case) as the rough equivalent of creolization, the celebration of the diversity that, in fact, exists in Mexico.

Historically, mestizaje as an official policy, while celebrating the mixing of the races, also placed restrictions on immigration of persons of African descent in both Brazil and Mexico, revealing the hypocrisy at the core of the official constructions of the concept. The handmaiden of mestizaje became the idea of *blanqueamiento* or “whitening,” sometimes referred to as *mejorando* or “improving” the race, which reveals more clearly, perhaps, than anything else, official mestizaje’s Eurocentric bias. The inclusion of *blanqueamiento* as a component of official mestizaje represents its most serious flaw. In the work of the Afromexicanistas, the idea of *blanqueamiento* is being vigorously challenged, as we shall see below.

Critiques of mestizaje in Mexico point out that it had long neglected the African component which is present to some degree in every Latin American and Caribbean nation. Rahier quotes Hale in this regard from a 1996 paper: “Most important, we analyze mestizaje almost exclusively as an ideology of race mixture involving Europeans and Indians, but not peoples of African descent” (qtd. Rahier, 2003). Recent scholarship has sought to rectify the neglect that Hale identifies but most often critics and defenders of mestizaje confine themselves to discussions of the mixing of European and indigenous populations. There are exceptions to this as the work on Ecuador, Colombia, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, by Rahier, Whitten, Peter Wade, Edmund Gordon, and David M. Guss, among others, demonstrates. Yet even Alan Knight, who has written one of the most penetrating analyses of Mexican *indigenismo*, concedes in “Racism,

Revolution, and Indigenismo: Mexico, 1910-1940,” his often cited essay, that “it is the fundamental Spanish/Indian polarity that will be considered” (1990: 72). This position is both logical and typical because of the greater phenotypical and cultural presence of the indigenous population in countries like Mexico and Guatemala. So the most penetrating critiques of mestizaje in Mexico concern its hypocrisy *vis a vis* the indigenous population.

As Knight and others have pointed out, the origins of official mestizaje extend back to the time of the Mexican War of Independence and found expression even during the brutal regime of Porfirio Diaz (1877-1911). Despite lip service to Mexico’s great pre-Colombian civilizations, Knight writes that “the practice of the Porfirian regime was one of Indian oppression” (1990: 79). Olivia Gall writes that the “state-building project” of the Diaz regime “considered the Indian as its main obstacle, one that could only be cleared through assimilation, by whatever means necessary” and that “the Porfirian disciples of Darwin and Spencer did nothing but promote an oligarchic *indigenismo* that never brought any improvement in standards of living to the Indians” (2002: 5). However, according to Knight, during this era, “some Porfirian thinkers, foreshadowing postrevolutionary *indigenismo*, looked to the transforming power of education” (1990: 79). Only after the revolution, and the rise of Vasconcelos as minister of education, was mestizaje as a concept of national identity given official sanction. The entire cultural apparatus of the new state devoted itself to a celebration of the indigenous roots of modern Mexico. This is most apparent, perhaps, in the murals of Mexican artists like José Clemente Orozco, Diego Rivera, and David Alfaro Siqueiros, all commissioned by Vasconcelos. Gall writes of Vasconcelos’s theatrical tactics, such as hanging a banner on the exterior of the National Stadium with “a red-and-yellow Aztec shield, with the legend: ‘Joyful, strong, healthy, shining race’” (127). Ted Vincent notes: “A hospital certificate given to parents of new-borns at a large Mexico City hospital says,

‘Congratulations on your addition to our bronze race.’” (N.D.). It remains difficult to doubt the sincerity of Vasconcelos. He consistently tried to resist a Eurocentric and, especially a North American bias. Knight quotes Vasconcelos as writing of the Anglo-Saxon as “the most deficient civilization which history has known” (qtd. 1990: 95), an example of what Knight calls, “straightforward reverse racism” (1990: 87). By accepting European racial theories and trying to critique them on their own premises, Vasconcelos’s concepts were inherently flawed. In many regards, his remarks and the cosmetic displays of post-revolutionary mestizaje amounted to only a slightly better situation than the double-standards of the Porfiriata. The problems in Chiapas in the last decade of the 20th century highlight the failures of Mexican mestizaje.

But despite these failures, significant though they continue to be, it is not too much to assert that the majority of educated Mexicans accept in principle, some degree of the idea of mestizaje. Mestizaje conforms to their daily lived experience as they are aware of key elements of their national history and they accept to a degree the official assertion of their own racial constitution. Mestizaje provides a justification for the existence of the Mexican nation and the main objectors are the large minority of indigenous people, especially those of Chiapas and the Yucatan. Again, I want to emphasize that the very serious objections of these indigenous people are valid. Their objections demand a rethinking and reformulation of traditional mestizaje.

Writing of Ecuador, Whitten suggests that “rather than treat mestizaje ideology as a unified and unifying doctrine” we should attempt to “present a selective topography of el mestizaje—the blending of a national social body—as viewed in specific spaces where concepts of *raza* (race) are salient in particular contexts and arenas” (2003). Whitten’s suggestion for Ecuador can be applied to Mexico where mestizaje enacts itself differently according to place and space even within almost contiguous geographical areas.

Despite the failure of official Mexican mestizaje, if one can rid it of the appendage of *blanqueamiento* the basic concept implies inclusion and a significant development in this regard lies in the official recognition, since the 1980s of the African contribution to national culture in the form of the program of Nuestra Tercera Raíz. In the pages that follow which discuss Afromexican scholarship, I will examine some of the salient features of this national educational program. As noted above, nearly all the Afromexicanista scholars, while not endorsing all its historical and official trappings, accept, to some degree, a notion of mestizaje. To their credit, these scholars unanimously call for a broadening of the concept to recognize the African contributions to their history and culture. One of the foremost of the Afromexicanistas, Luz María Martínez Montiel maintains, in a statement elaborated upon further below, that, “the search for an identity by the peoples produced by mestizaje is today, a vital proposition” (1993: 14). This statement, which reflects the belief of many, implies an acceptance of the *fact* of mestizaje (with a small “m”), and demonstrates both the concept’s resilience and its correspondence to a perceived reality in Mexico.

III. Afromexican Scholarship

A survey of the scholarship in English, concerning the African presence in Mexico reveals a neglected area of African diaspora studies. However, the work done by Mexican scholars in this field, especially in the past two decades, represents something like an academic growth industry. Building upon the work of anthropologist, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, a student of Melville Herskovits, Mexican investigators have brought to light a rich store of previously forgotten material which, according to Martínez Montiel, perhaps the most prolific author on the subject of Afromexico in recent years, has developed into “a vast field of research” (1997: 279). Aguirre Beltrán, whose complete anthropological works alone comprise 16 volumes, is best known in the U.S. for two important studies: *La Población Negra de México* (1946) and *Cuijla, Esbozo etnográfico de un pueblo negro* (1958). Unfortunately even these two pioneering works have yet to be translated into English. A few brief essays by Aguirre Beltrán are all that exist of his work that is accessible to the English-speaking student (see Morner: 1970). Appropriately enough, current English-language explorations of the history of Afromexicans cannot compare to the breadth and depth of the recent work by Mexican scholars who have developed a sub-discipline of Afromexican studies. This is regrettable because a very useful and constructive exchange of ideas might take place if North American scholars would read more of the work of their near neighbors and colleagues. Aguirre Beltrán’s historical research and ethnographic studies have paved the way for a generation of Mexican scholars who are eager to uncover the African contributions to their nation’s identity. Known as Don Gonzalo to this new crop of scholars, Aguirre Beltrán, who died in 1996, is rightly considered the intellectual father of the official Mexican government program that was known as *Nuestra Tercera Raíz* (“our third root”). This program was inaugurated in the 1980s by the national Office of Popular Culture of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historia (INAH), headed by

Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, partly as a result of a UNESCO initiative. As Martínez Montiel remarks, “The recognition of *Nuestra Tercera Raíz* explains the past to us and permits us to ratify historically our ethnic and cultural plurality” (1993: 4). This extraordinary endeavor, a government-sponsored program which had an apparently politically-disinterested regard for the discovery of the nation’s past, did not emerge as a result of political pressure from Afromexicans since this amorphous group of people remain largely unorganized. Therefore, the project must be seen as a mestizo initiative. *Nuestra Tercera Raíz* developed under the auspices of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), which ruled Mexico for three-quarters of a century under different names. When the PRI lost power to Vicente Fox’s *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN) in 2000, the program was effectively defunded. But so thoroughly did it take root in academic institutions around the country that many state governments have stepped in to fill the gap. Accordingly, this thesis presents a survey of Afromexicanista studies on the development of slavery in various geographical locations within the country. In addition, Mexico is a large and diverse nation of 100 million people and the experience of Afromexicans varies according to place and space and the historical demands placed upon them in each. Because of Mexico’s previous (and present) celebration of the philosophy of mestizaje, the study of the African contributions to the national identity might seem to present a contradiction to, or alternatively, a broadening of the controversial concept of mestizaje, and several scholars have directly addressed this issue. Martínez Montiel writes:

From the conquest to our days, the countries of the Americas have been oriented toward an assimilation of the values of western culture, but on the other hand, the search for an identity by the peoples produced by mestizaje is still today, a vital proposition. Our history of the past two centuries is in part, one of difficulties and accomplishments as we try to consolidate a

project of national culture. In the new history we must include all the cultural processes and movements—such as blackness—that have contributed to the formation of this identity as multi-ethnic and pluri-cultural peoples. (1993: 14)

Montiel's remark highlights the vexing problem in African Diaspora Studies posed by the question of mestizaje. Is mestizaje an inclusive philosophy, derived from historical necessity, which attempts to use historical realities in the process of nation-building? Or is it, as some critics have claimed, an exclusive doctrine derived from Eurocentric ideas which celebrates the indigenous heritage in theory (while disparaging it in practice) and totally disavows the legacy of Africa. Certainly mestizaje, as officially interpreted throughout much of the 20th Century, favors the European heritage. The project of *Nuestra Tercera Raíz* and its academic heirs represents an attempt to broaden mestizaje to recognize and celebrate the African contributions to Latin American cultures while at the same time, elevating the indigenous cultures that have too long been recognized in word but not in practice. So while this is largely a mestizo initiative there are reasons to hope it contains a self-critical element that seeks to broaden traditional notions.

Martínez Montiel argues for an aggressive approach to uncovering and celebrating the African element in contemporary Mexican culture. She sees museums as one arena for the development of this search for national identity:

It is necessary, then, to activate the factors of identity, this new cultural history that includes that of the Indian and the African, as well as the European. In consequence, various countries of America would have to create ethnic museums, and in all, spread the existence, with their contents, of *nuestra tercera raíz* that is African. (1993: 14)

In many ways, her ideas are legitimate heirs to the goals of the Mexican Revolution (1910-20) which sought to destroy the economic power of the predominantly white elite

whose hegemony was consolidated during the Porfiriata in the late 19th and early 20th Century. Martínez Montiel feels that much remains to be done on the cultural level, especially in the uncovering of the African root, when she writes:

The idea of ethnic pluralism implies: in culture, the rejection of all elitist definitions; the affirmation of the collective patrimony, giving recognition to other notions that derive from it, such as ‘popular culture,’ that do not establish hierarchies and define simply the specific components of a joint culture that is integrated. (1993: 16)

Martínez Montiel asserts that “conscious history can be considered a process that is used to unite people” and that “a national historical consciousness [must] supercede ethnic divisions, giving place to a patient reconstruction of history” (1993: 11) giving equal privilege to all its ethnic components. This was the promise of *mestizaje*, a promise that was not previously fulfilled.

The attempt to locate an Afromexican identity today relies in great measure on the efforts to accurately reconstruct the forgotten history. It remains unknown with certainty just when the African presence first manifested itself in Mexico. Fernando Winfield Capitaine argues that at least since 1862, theories of the African origins of pre-Colombian civilization have been entertained but concludes that no hard evidence has convinced the “scientific community” to date. (1993: 133). For over a century, commentators have remarked on the “negroid” features of the the giant Olmec sculpted heads (*cabezas colosales*) which are found in Southern Veracruz and Tabasco. José Luís Lorenzo (INAH) engages the debate over African migrations across the Atlantic in “prehistoric” times. While skeptical, Lorenzo admits the possibility of such early contact but argues that even if the Olmec heads are of African origin, without additional evidence they remain “isolated elements and innocuous” (1988: 12). Martínez Montiel agrees that “hypotheses that have called powerfully for attention attribute an African

origin to Olmec culture,” but finds that “the arguments in favor of this have not satisfactorily convinced the archaeologists” but adds that she “remains open to the debate over this theme” (1993: 4). Lorenzo calls for continued archaeological work to either prove or disprove the ancient African origins. Sagrario Cruz Carretaro places more credence in the pre-Colombian theories: “Globalization was not an invention of the Europeans when Columbus arrived. If you analyze the ocean currents, it’s obvious that the ocean currents reach Africa and pass through the Atlantic and reach the coast of Yucatan and go through the Gulf of Mexico up to Florida and back to Europe. So why not?” (2002: interview). Her idea approaches some Afrocentric thinking on the African origins of New World civilizations.

Despite the controversy over the pre-Colombian contact theories, as Martínez Montiel puts it, “only in the 16th century can we speak historically of the African presence in Mexico” (1993: 5-6). Most of the serious scholarship begins with the Spanish conquest of 1520-21. Therefore, Afromexican studies generally limits itself to the years after the three-way contact of Spanish, African, and Indian. (Capitaine 1993: 133)

After presenting a brief summary of the literature in English, this thesis will focus on the work of Mexican and other Spanish-speaking scholars. Any such survey is necessarily selective. The focus is largely, but not entirely, on the state of Veracruz which has one of the largest populations of Afromexicans in the country. In addition to a selective reading of the available scholarship, this thesis offers a selective chronology including a discussion of Medieval Spanish law governing slavery, a panorama of Afromexican history, a brief exploration of some aspects of sexuality and race, and finally a profile of the descendants of African slaves in two locations in the state of Veracruz. The village of El Coyolillo, outside of Xalapa, capital of the state of Veracruz, presents a cross section of people, many of whom have obvious African phenotypical traits, and whose development can be traced

back to a sugar plantation (*ingenio*), San Miguel de Almolonga, from colonial times.

Yanga, which has an illustrious history because of the successful slave rebellion there in the early 17th century, will also be discussed.

A. Brief Survey of the Literature in English

To say that the literature on Afromexico written in or translated into English is scant would be an understatement. An important essay by David Davidson, “Negro Slave Control and Resistance in Colonial Mexico, 1519-1650,” (1966), and Colin Palmer’s engaging study, *Slaves of the White God* (1976), are two early explorations of the topic from a generation ago. More recent works have tended to be geographically specific, such as Patrick Carroll’s *Blacks in Colonial Veracruz* (1990), and the work of anthropologists Laura Lewis (2000, 2001) and Bobby Vaughan (2001) on La Costa Chica on Mexico’s Pacific coast. All of these works have depth and merit. Davidson’s essay remains important because it represents a relatively early investigation of the history of Africans in Mexico at a time when the subject remained almost scandalously under-researched. Davidson was one of the first scholars to present the history of Yanga, the renowned *cimarron* leader of the 16th-17th centuries (discussed below), to an English-speaking audience. Palmer’s study made use of the available sources at the time and remains an incisive look at the African experience in Mexico. Carroll’s work, which presents much previously uncovered material, suffers perhaps from a lack of the type of perspective that informs Palmer’s. Carroll presents revealing portraits of the evolution of slavery and race relations in the state of Veracruz, especially with his discussion of the Xalapa fair, an annual commercial and social experiment which brought the diverse ethnic groups together on a nonviolent historical stage during the mid-18th Century. (see also *Ferias de Xalapa*, Abel Juárez Martínez, et al. 1995). Along with other historians, Carroll places the Spanish, the African, and the indigenous peoples as the three main ethnic groups in colonial Mexico. However, he finds that the African cultural presence

has been nearly erased over the centuries. “While miscegenation increased racial categories,” writes Carroll, “it, coupled with a decline in the Veracruz-African slave trade, virtually eradicated one of the original racial and ethnic groups. *Black Africans underwent near racial absorption and ethnic assimilation* between 1620 and 1750 in central Veracruz” (emphasis added, 1991: 120). Palmer, who is more focused on the African diaspora than Carroll, does not entirely disagree when he writes: “No longer do they [Afromexicans] see themselves as Mandinga, Wolof, Ibo, Bakongo, or members of other African ethnic groups; their self-identity is Mexican, and they share much with other members of their nation-state” (Palmer). But Palmer is more attuned to cultural survivals, or “Africanisms” that still exist in modern Mexico, such as the round houses (*casas redondas*) of La Costa Chica. But on the whole, according to this view, Afromexicans today, despite African phenotypical traits, are as Mexican as most of their neighbors.

Laura Lewis worked closely with the people of La Costa Chica, arguably the most African of Mexico’s surviving black populations. Lewis has also done important work in the colonial archives. Her project is to locate an Afromexican black identity in the people of La Costa Chica. Her work, along with that of Bobby Vaughan and other anthropologists in that area, has coincided with an increase in black consciousness among the people of Cuijla and surrounding areas. Partly as a result of the efforts of the local priest in San Nicolás, Glyn Jemmot (who will be mentioned further below), there is now an annual *Encuentro de los pueblos afromexicanos* which attracts people of African descent from other parts of Mexico, as well as scholars and supporters from Mexico and North and South America. While this may represent an incipient and genuine black consciousness movement, La Costa Chica remains outside of the focus of study here.

The work of Lewis and Vaughan seeks to relocate blackness in the Mexican scheme of identity. As Lewis notes:

Aguirre Beltrán's work, the recent Third Root Project, and other research on black Mexicans mark a departure from the customary invisibility of blacks in the scholarship on Mexico. This invisibility also characterized Mexican nationalist sentiment, which in fact actively calculated blacks' disappearance from the nation while centering mestizos and Indians in it. (2000)

While this statement is certainly true of the past, and of the official Mestizaje, it may not recognize the sheer volume of work that Mexican historians, anthropologists, and sociologists have completed and are continuing to produce in an effort to present a more balanced interpretation of Mexican history and national identity. Lewis states that "Not all of this research has been connected to the Third Root Project" (2000). While this may be true, much of this research began under the auspices of this program.

B. Selective Review of the Literature in Spanish

The enormous amount of available literature in Spanish on Afromexico prevents anything but the most general overview here. The account of the readings presented here is necessarily selective. Aguirre Beltrán's work is the foundation upon which virtually all of this scholarship rests. His tireless investigations have inspired his successors with a remarkable zeal. Many of these scholars spend endless hours in musty archives and months of fieldwork in the blazing heat throughout the country, from Córdoba, Xalapa, and Orizaba in the East to Puebla, Mexico, Guanajuato, and Morelia in the Central Highlands, to Oaxaca and Acapulco on the West coast, to the Yucatan peninsula. Their revelations shed light on one of the most under-researched areas of African diaspora studies. To attempt an overview of their work, it proves useful to speak first of the origins and growth of *Nuestra Tercera Raíz* program and then, after profiling some of the major Afromexicanistas, to attempt a survey of the current scholarship based on thematic areas of specialization.

1. Luz María Martínez Montiel and *Nuestra Tercera Raíz*

The 200,000 or more Africans who were brought to New Spain as slaves have, for the most part, through centuries of miscegenation, become absorbed into Mexico's *mestizo* population. After the Spanish conquest, the vast majority of the people of Mexico were indigenous, despite a traumatic decimation of the population due to war, hunger and disease. The number of indigenous fell from an estimated 20 million in 1521 to an estimated 2-3 million a century later. Even with this catastrophic decrease, indigenous people represented 98 percent of the population of New Spain throughout much of the colonial period (Muhammad, 1995b: 165). The second most populous group in post-conquest Mexico were African slaves who outnumbered Europeans and white Creoles by two to one (1995b: 165). Europeans, mostly Spaniards, represented a distant third. Though many Spaniards and Indians displayed ethnocentric traits and tended, for the most part, to socialize and marry endogamously, there was a significant and increasing mixing of the races to the point that today, it can be safely assumed, that most Mexican have a mixture of Indian, Spanish, and African ancestry, (A "fourth root" in Mexico's racial mix are Asians. See Gómez Izquierdo, "La 'raza mexicana' ante el 'peligro amarillo'" in *La Regiones de las Quimeras*, 2001: 63-68.)

El Programa de Nuestra Tercera Raíz was initiated largely through the efforts of Martínez Montiel and Bonfil Batalla. Unlike the United States of America, Mexico does not have a large minority population of persons who identify themselves as of African descent. "Black Studies" programs in the U.S. grew out of a response to political pressure by African Americans, who had been protesting for over a century over the neglect or denial of their history and culture in the universities' curricula. One of the most important results of the civil rights and black power movements of the 1960s and 70s was the introduction of "Black Studies" into the curriculum at every level of education. African Americans have assumed leadership positions in most university

“Black Studies” departments. In Mexico the situation is very different. The work of Aguirre Beltrán can be said to have jumpstarted the *Nuestra Tercera Raíz* program. Martínez Montiel and others in the movement acknowledge his pioneering work at every turn. However, while studies of Africa in Mexico are expanding rapidly, almost none of the Afromexicanista scholars identify as Afromexican. This may be due to the continuing poverty and lack of educational opportunity in what can be considered phenotypically African enclaves in Mexico. For whatever reason, I have been unable to locate a scholar in the field who unambiguously identifies him/herself as Afromexican, except for Sagrario Cruz who claims a black grandfather (2002: interview). But if the mixing (*mezcla*) of the races proceeded at the rate that the scholarship suggests, it is virtually impossible for most Mexicans to trace their “racial” or genetic history with any degree of accuracy and few seem interested in doing so. According to statistics from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture cited by Jameelah S. Muhammad, 75 percent of Mexicans have some black ancestry (1995b: 169). If the “one-drop rule” was applied to Mexico, the majority of the population would be considered black. Technically, Mexico could be considered a nation of the African diaspora. Yet most scholars do not seriously view it as such and with good reason. For the Spanish and indigenous roots remain far more pronounced than the African. Yet, because of such thorough race-mixing, it is likely that many of the Afromexicanistas are themselves distant cousins of others in the African Diaspora.

The interest in Afromexico continues to grow. Beginning in 1999, the port of Veracruz began holding an annual “Afrocaribbean Festival” and, on a more grass-roots level, on La Costa Chica there is an annual *Encuentro de los pueblos afromexicanos*, organized by a group called *Mexico Negro*. This year’s meeting was held in San Nicolás, the area which Laura Lewis has researched. Among the moving forces behind *Mexico Negro* are Sergio Peñaloza, an operative of the left Partido Revolucionario

Democratiza (PRD) led by former Mexico City mayor Cuauhtémoc Cardenas (son of Lazaro Cardenas, who as president in the 1930s, nationalized Mexico's oilfields to the outrage of U.S. oil companies). Another unofficial force in *Mexico Negro* is Glyn Jemmott, the black priest from Trinidad and Tobago who has served on La Costa Chica for over a decade. He built a local high school and library, shows movies, and conducts a summer school for area residents. The major goals of the *Encuentro de los pueblos afroamericanos*, and *Mexico Negro* are over issues of education, community initiatives, and local Afroamerican culture. The group holds regular discussions which focus on issues of identity, history, mass media representations, agriculture, human and veterinary health issues, and other community problems. They also encourage traditional dance and performance. Jemmott must be careful not to violate Mexico's law which forbids foreigners from engaging in political activity. The efforts by the Afroamerican communities of La Costa Chica to increase consciousness and reclaim an identity are enhanced by the project of *Nuestra Tercera Raíz*. This program has created an intellectual climate that lends increased credibility to the grassroots movement. In the small town of Cuajinicuilapa, where Aguirre Beltrán did research five decades ago, there is now, since 1999, a museum, *Museo de las Culturas Afroamericanas*, devoted to the history of the people of the region. One of the goals of this incipient movement is to obtain for Afroamerican villages an indigenous status. As James Clifford has asked, "How long does it take to become indigenous?" Or better, under what circumstances can a people be said to have become indigenous. Can Afroamericans now, after nearly five centuries of presence in Mexico, claim indigenous status? The case of Mexico and its Afroamericano population poses an interesting question. Can these Afroamericans now be considered indigenous Mexicans with indigenous rights to land-use as defined by official Mexican policy and law? These are some of the questions being asked by Afroamericans of La Costa Chica.

Aguirre Beltrán was the first to study the communities of La Costa Chica in depth. His 1958 work, *Cuijla, Esbozo etnográfico de un pueblo negro*, centers on the major town in the area. But the origins of the more recent efforts to reclaim Afromexican history are found primarily in Veracruz. In the 1980s Martínez Montiel came to work in Xalapa and essentially began the work of *La Tercera Raíz* encouraging the work of other scholars in Chihuahua, Oaxaca, Puebla, and other locations in Mexico. Periodically, since 1993, the Afromexicanistas hold conventions and present papers. The essays are then presented in book form and offered for sale. Much of the information in this essay comes from a reading of these collections.

2. Adriana Naveda Chávez-Hita

Adriana Naveda (Universidad Veracruzana) is one of the foremost scholars researching the African presence in Mexico. A native of Papantla in Northern Veracruz, Naveda grew up in Córdoba in the same state. Córdoba occupies a singular position in the colonial history of New Spain. Unlike cities such as Puebla, Orizaba, Xalapa, Veracruz, and others near the Gulf Coast which were founded in the 16th Century, Córdoba was not planned and developed until the 17th Century. Córdoba owes its presence to two important factors: the rich fields that surround it which are capable of sugar-production, and the need to found a fortified city on the route from Veracruz to the Central Highland cities, that was subject to constant assaults by *cimarrones* (Naveda 1988: 262). These factors dictated that Córdoba would become a major center of the incipient capitalist economy based upon slavery as opposed to the other cities in which slavery, although present, was less ubiquitous. Naveda's study, *Esclavos negros en las haciendas azucareras de Córdoba, Veracruz 1690-1830* (1987) provides an in-depth treatment of the development of the city and its slave economy. Like many other historians, Naveda recounts the events surrounding Yanga's famous uprising in 1609. The pueblo of San Lorenzo de Los Negros (or San Lorenzo de Cerralvo), today's Yanga,

prides itself on being “the first free town in the Americas” (*primer pueblo libre de América*). The settlement was founded just 20 kilometers from the future slave center of Córdoba, which grew rapidly with its own notion of “manifest destiny,” swallowing up neighboring properties. Naveda writes of Córdoba’s “usurpations of the properties of *naturales* and Spaniards” (1988: 265). These seizures could not help but threaten San Lorenzo de los Negros. These two communities possessed a natural enmity toward one another and Naveda includes a chapter on the long hostility between them (1987: 125-132).

In addition to her study of Córdoba, Naveda has written numerous journal articles and contributes to the periodic publications following the Afromexicanista conferences. She edited the most recent collection of essays entitled, *Pardos, Mulatos and Libertos: Sexto Encuentro de Afromexicanistas* (2001). Among her most useful works is an essay describing the racial nomenclature used by colonial authorities and another detailing the various mechanisms of liberation used by slaves throughout the colonial period. The interpellation by race or color of groups of people during the colonial era was always a highly subjective endeavor that presents pitfalls for the researcher. Naveda points to this issue when she writes:

We must be very careful when doing quantitative work. We could arrive at a global estimation, by regions, of the number of persons descended from African slaves. That is to say, of *Afromestizos* or “persons of negro blood,” but the subjectivity of the source must be weighed by the researcher before he/she judges the racial and demographic composition in a specific social space. (2001: 203)

Racial categorizations that came into common use were arbitrary terms, often coined, or at least recorded by notaries and priests on written records. Naveda understates the case when she writes, “There is a great complexity in the nomenclature

recorded in the documents of this era” (2001: 201). As many scholars have pointed out, the racial mixing usually came about as a result of the union Spanish and African men with either African and Indigenous women. The Europeans, a distinct demographic minority, were overwhelmingly male, as were African slaves. This left indigenous women as the primary erotic object for both European and African men. This gave rise to the complex system of *castas*. Muhammad claims that most of the children of these unions were illegitimate. She writes, “While it is certain that marriage played its part in the mixing of the races, without a doubt, concubinage and casual sexual relations explain the majority of the racial crossing during the colonial era.” (1995b: 53). As early as 1924, Mexican anthropologist Nicolás León listed 53 separate racial classifications, which do not include others uncovered by historians since that time. Muhammad lists over one hundred categories (1995a). Naveda describes how this interpellative process worked.

The scribe or the priest applied, based on his perception, experience or interest, a classification determining the racial mix of the individual described, that may or may not have corresponded with biological reality. With the passage of time, when the process of *mestizaje* eroded the social base of the *castas*, the racial status, “*pase de color*” was sustained mainly in these parochial registers. (2001: 199-200)

Naveda goes on to describe the currency of the different terms:

The *casta* was most commonly named a *pardo*—descended from an indian and a negro—and their successive mixes. The child of a *mulato* and a *parda* woman would be called *morisco*. However, in the document, the denomination of *pardo* is often applied to those who present a predominantly Indian appearance. We find documents with the following denominations: broken (*quebrado, de color quebrado*) or mixed;

membrillo or *sambo*, however never preceded by the word *pardo*, as is the case with the *mulatos*. The word “moreno,” without denoting any specific racial mix, was utilized in Veracruz and many other parts during the Viceroyalty in the late 18th century, to refer to whatever mix of Spanish and black that showed a dark color, encompassing all those in which the African features and European features were both apparent. One example of this generalization can be seen in the denomination of *Milicias de Pardos y Morenos libres*, the military body composed largely of blacks and *mulatos*. (2001: 202)

The black colonial militias will be discussed further below. Naveda is now working on a project profiling the long ideological and economic conflict between Córdoba and the free black town of Yanga.

3. Sagrario Cruz Carretero

Sagrario Cruz Carretero is an anthropologist based in Xalapa at the Universidad Veracruzana. Her first publication, *El Carnaval en Yanga: Notas y comentarios sobre una fiesta de la negritud* (1990, with Alfredo Martínez Maranto and Angélica Santiago Silva) profiled the celebration of blackness in the “first free town in the Americas.” Yanga today is primarily a *mestizo* town. “Symbolically they [the people of Yanga] represent the black hero although their knowledge of him is somewhat diffuse” writes Cruz. “As a result the importance of Yanga seems to reside in his being a symbol of the black man who was the catalyst for liberty in the Americas” (2002). Cruz completed her post-graduate work at Universidad de las Americas in Puebla and worked with Aguirre Beltrán during the early phase of her study of the Afromexican community of Mata Clara, just outside of Yanga. More than any of the other Afromexicanistas I encountered, Cruz is partisan in her support of political, cultural and economic rights for Afromexicans *as* Afromexicans today.

Cruz attributes part of her interest to a trip to Cuba, which she says, “stole my heart,” and to her own African heritage:

In 1984 I spent a summer in Cuba. During my visit I discovered a very strong African heritage [...] was very similar to the African heritage in Veracruz. My family was from Tlacotalpan, the hometown of Aguirre Beltran. I discovered from my cousin that my grandfather was black. I didn't know that because all the time they refer to themselves as “morenos.” And my grandmother made jokes about the color of my grandfather but we never had the connection that they were black. And suddenly I discovered a black heritage in my own family in my own country. [...] I asked my grandmother and she told me that “this is the guilt of your great grandmother because she is Cuban.” But now I think she talked about a Cuban great grandmother because she is black. The relation ... to be Cuban is similar to be black. [...] It's very hard to know now because we have a scarcity of information about our past. (2002, interview)

Aside from Cruz Carretero other Afromexicanistas have traveled to Cuba to observe the African influences there to compare them with those of Mexico, particularly in the state of Veracruz. Cruz recalls her work with Aguirre Beltrán who “accompanied me throughout the Yanga area in the central region of Veracruz State and he selected Mata Clara, the community which he considered contained the largest Afro-genetic pool” (2002). Aguirre Beltrán chose this community based on his physical observation and subjective evaluation of the phenotypical traits of selective inhabitants. (Cruz, interview, 2002). Cruz maintains that her work in Mata Clara “was highly criticized by the academic community, who referred to us as ‘Black head-hunters.’...I found myself within legal schizophrenia and academia,” she writes, referring to the absence of a legal

status for blacks in contemporary Mexico (2003). Blacks in Mexico are not recognized as an ethnic minority as are indigenous people. Mexican authorities use language, not race, as an ethnic determiner. Cruz restates what nearly every other Afromexicanista confirms: that Afromexicans usually disavow the interpellation of *negro*. As Lewis remarks of the Afromexicans in La Costa Chica, “Blacks’ consider negro to be something of an insult when applied to contemporary populations. They reserve ‘negro’ for ancestors, who were ‘really, really black,’ while identifying themselves instead as *moreno*” (Lewis: 2001). In Mata Clara, Cruz “found general denial to consider themselves openly Black. They preferred to call themselves ‘Morenos’ (dark-brown) or ‘Cubans’” (2002). The cultural identification of Afromexicans in Veracruz with Cuba and the Caribbean is apparent, especially in music which will be discussed below.

Cruz gives more credence to the idea of pre-Columbian contact between African and Mexico. She is also the author of a work for children describing Yanga’s history in the form of a coloring book which was distributed in parts of the state of Veracruz. Cruz is presently researching 19th century Mexican literature for profiles of blackness.

I am particularly interested in discovering the black heritage in Mexican literature. It is something that has not been explored. Literature is considered fiction but it is fiction and reality. There are many references in 19th century literature that are related to black presence, especially here in Veracruz. The 19th century is the period when the denomination of *castas* are lost. So suddenly blacks disappear officially. It’s full of blacks but they disappear because it is forbidden to call somebody black or *moreno* or *pardo* officially. But in literature they are present. It is something that I would like to explore in the future. Also you can recreate the daily life in literature rather than documents in the archives. You can only speculate in documents (2002, interview).

As mentioned above, more than most other Afromexicanistas, Sagrario Cruz sees herself as an activist in the Afromexican cause. In addition to her fieldwork in Mata Clara, Cruz, who is fluent in English, has become a spokesperson for Afromexicanistas to the Anglophone academic community. Though she is often invited to participate in conferences in the U.S., in many respects she is untypical. Yet her fluency in English gives her more credibility in some Anglophone circles. In addition, her ideas seem more in tune with some North American academic opinion. She believes that racism against Afromexicans is pervasive in her country. Some of her colleagues dispute this by pointing to the small number of truly Afromexican communities.

4. Alfredo Martínez Maranto

Alfredo Martínez Maranto is a social anthropologist and researcher for the Mexican government's Department of Social Development, (*Secretaría de Desarrollo Social*). He was formerly an ethnographic investigator with the *Dirección General de Culturas Populares e Indígenas* in Xalapa, and wrote a celebrated essay, "Dios pinta como quiere: Identidad y cultura en un pueblo afromestizo de Veracruz" (1994), on the Afromexicans of El Coyolillo. Martínez Maranto is the leading expert on the Afromexicans of this region.

More than the other scholars profiled here, Martínez Maranto, categorically rejects mestizaje as an ideology of national identity because he believes it to be inherently and irretrievably racist. He is presently at work on a study of racism in Mexican indigenous anthropology. He discusses the works of leading theorists of mestizaje such as Manuel Gamio and Moisés Sáenz who sought to present Mexico as a homogenous country both racially and linguistically. This ideal, the "cosmic race" of mestizos, as José Vasconcelos called it, remains elusive.

"Racism, especially racism against the Indian," says Martínez Maranto, "is recognized in other countries in the Americas but it is not accepted as existing in

Mexico” (2002: 3). He maintains that racism is built into the foundations of much Mexican indigenous anthropology when he writes, “Racism in the discourse of indigenous anthropology is founded on the belief that the indigenous will ‘improve’ (*mejorar*) biologically and culturally if they mix with the white or the *mestizo*” (2002: 3-4). He finds that Mexican anthropology owes much of its philosophy to racist thinkers of the 19th and 20th centuries such as Gobineau, Renan, and Chamberlain, and to Social Darwinism. As evidence of this racism, Martínez Maranto points to a remark by Moises Saenz, “I believe in the Indian *inside* the Mexican...the Indian as an Indian has no future in Mexico” (qtd. 2002: 4). Martínez Maranto’s remarks on indigenous anthropology can be applied equally to some earlier investigations of Afromexicans. Martínez Maranto sums up the state of the discipline by saying that:

The proposal of mestizaje as a paradigm for the national formation, sustained by the discourse of Mexican indigenous anthropology, has a racist character in the way it argues for the progressive disappearance of somatic features and the dissolution of cultural expressions of ethnicities called Indians. (2002: 5)

Martínez Maranto see no difference between the philosophy of mestizaje and that of “whitening.” He believes the two are inseparable. In a recent letter, he writes: “In the last resort we can see that the ideology of mestizaje *is* ‘to whiten’ people who are not ‘white,’ especially the indigenous population” (personal communication, 2/10/2003).

Martínez Maranto’s critique of Mexican anthropology is thorough and does not exclude even Aguirre Beltrán for even he held racialist ideas. Martínez Maranto states:

Aguirre Beltrán, in his book, *El Proceso de Aculturación*, said that *indigenismo* is the cultural expression of a biological phenomenon, which seems to me to be a concept that is completely biologically determined, that biology determines culture, or race determines culture, something

like that. (2002: interview)

I asked him if he did not think that mestizaje as it exists in theory and practice in Mexico is qualitatively different than the ideological construction of mestizaje in many other Latin American nations. He answers that, “Certainly the situation in Mexico is different in that the African or *Afromestizo* presence is distinct from the other [Latin American] countries” (personal communication, 2/11/2003). He continues:

Now, no one says that it is bad for the people to mix. What is bad is that an elite decides...that the people must mix to achieve “higher” levels of development. That is to say: for them it is necessary to “whiten” to be “civilized” This is no more and no less than racism, although it is another type of racism. (personal communication, 2/11/2003)

Martínez Maranto’s work is now more theoretical as the above comments indicate. He worked previously in the field doing ethnographic profiles. He co-authored the book, *El Carnaval en Yanga* (with Sagrario Cruz and Angélica Santiago Silva, 1990, referred to above) and later conducted extensive ethnographic work in El Coyolillo, culminating in his exhaustive and illuminating essay which will be discussed below.

IV. A Panorama of Afromexican History

A. Pre-Conquest Slavery in Spain

According to Adriana Naveda, the Spanish institution of slavery owed much to the tradition of “classical slavery.” Her remarks, which may reflect a somewhat Hispanophilic view of history, are worth quoting at length. The following is a translation/paraphrase of her words:

Before the establishment of slavery in the New World, Spain possessed a legal code, known as “Las Siete Partidas” created by Alfonso the Wise in the 13th century, that defined the relations between master and slave. This code remained in effect during the whole period of Spanish colonialism and was the basis for new laws governing the relationship between master and slave. ... The existence of *Las Siete Partidas* was used to justify and normalize the inhumanity of slavery. The intention of the law was to mediate between master and slave.

The *Siete Partidas* contained provisions to protect the slave from bad treatment by the master. They prohibited the master from mutilating or killing his slave except where such punishment was authorized by an established legal authority for certain “crimes.” The laws obliged the master to give the slave adequate food and shelter and specifically forbade castration and rape. They were meant to guarantee the slave the right to marry against the wishes of the owner and once married the owner could not separate the couple. Any children would take the legal status (slave or free) of the mother. This matrilineal descent provided an incentive for African slaves to seek marriage partners outside of their own racial/ethnic group. ... The Metropole had a long legal tradition governing the treatment of slaves that had evolved during the Middle

Ages and which had incorporated the experiences obtained in the first stage of expansion [the *reconquista*]. Most importantly, the laws contained provisions for the slave to purchase his own freedom and for other forms of manumission. (Naveda 1993: 89)

Spain's tradition of slavery, according to this view, has much in common with "classical slavery" as defined by T.A. Osae, S.N. Nwabara, and A.T.O. Odunsi in their *Short History of West Africa* (1973). The authors identify "classical slavery" as a stage of evolution in nearly every civilization. While regrettable from the overall moral point of view, "classical slavery" recognizes the humanity of the slave and outlines the responsibilities of the master toward the slave. This "classical slavery" was the type that existed in most ancient civilizations, including the Greek which, of course, forms one of the foundations of Western Civilization. "Classical slavery" also developed in parts of Africa, the Far East, and in the Arab world. However, Osae, Nwabara, and Odunsi insist that the form of chattel slavery developed by the European powers from the 16th century onwards represents a "degenerate slavery" which denies the humanity of the slave and therefore relieves the master from any moral responsibilities whatsoever. This "degenerate slavery" became the hallmark of Western colonialism. This abdication of morality by the slaveowners allowed the centuries of abuse that decimated Africa and the Americas and shaped the world we presently inhabit.

So while the Spanish tradition, with its rich heritage of centuries of Arabic influence, began the modern era embracing a "classical slavery," its reintegration into the West, especially after the *reconquista*, also led it, within a short period of time, to practice the "degenerate slavery" that came to characterize the other European powers. Reflecting the views of Osae, et al., and Eric William in *Capitalism and Slavery*, Martínez Montiel argues that modern industrial capitalism was able to develop, in large part, precisely because of the Atlantic Slave Trade. "The impulse given by the slave

trade to the Industrial Revolution,” she writes, “was notable: the steam engine and the first British railways and other advances too numerous to mention, were financed by the slave trade” (2001: 232). Montiel’s argument suggests that a rapacious capitalism, a qualitative departure from earlier industry and commerce, developed because of the removal of moral constraints that characterized slavery and spread into the incipient industrial societies themselves. This explains the Dickensian nightmare that was home to workers and their families in London and Manchester and Liverpool as well as the inhuman conditions on plantations in the United States and throughout Anglo-, French- and Latin America. Describing the effects of the institution of slavery on both Africa and the Americas, Martínez Montiel writes:

The traffic in slaves as a gigantic international operation that favored the growth of industries, especially in England, was a tremendous destruction of the cultures of Africa. The Europeans did not introduce their “modernity” as they were doing in America. They introduced gunpowder, muskets and rum, to promote the most lucrative business of the epoch, slavery. (2001: 236-237)

Martínez Montiel remarks echo those of Walter Rodney in *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, and she argues that because of the slave trade, between the 16th and 19th centuries, “Africa lost 100 million women and men (generally the best): those brought directly as slaves to America and the dead from the passage or at the hands of the traders” (2001: 236). The great majority of this number were lost in the passage across the Atlantic. While cataloging the horrors of what Osae, et al. refer to as the “degenerate slavery” of the Atlantic Slave Trade, Martínez Montiel also points to the heroism of African resistance:

The results of the trade were terrible, an entire continent was submerged in economic and moral chaos and that the ultimate process of

colonialization only encountered a weak resistance was a further argument of racism—it demonstrated the innate servility of the black race—forgetting that during the centuries of the trade, the rebellions of slaves, followed by bloody reprisals, were daily, and even the jailed and defeated blacks admired the valor of those slaves who confronted the traders. (2001: 237)

The fact of the eventual supremacy of the British in the slave trade does not exonerate the Spanish, who after all, continued to purchase African slaves throughout the colonial era. Some commentators feel that Spain, more than any other power, bears responsibility for the spread of racism. Jorge Gómez Izquierdo finds that 19th century racist philosophers such as Gobineau, held that “the white race” is superior but contains the “germ of its own destruction” (2001: 27) in its desire to yield to the temptations occasioned by the flesh of the “darker races.” This view, of course, refers primarily to the supposed allure of African and native American women to the white male colonist, combining ideas of both desire and dread. Gobineau was elaborating a theme that had been developed throughout the colonial period (see below). The mixing of whites with blacks or Indians will, according to this theory, lead to the “definitive triumph of ‘bastardized blood’” that will “signal the end of human civilization” (2001: 27). Unlike some other commentators, Gómez Izquierdo finds this philosophy perfectly exemplified by the policies of Spanish colonialism in the New World, policies which anticipated the more formal pronouncements of scientific racism of writers such as Gobineau. Spain was one of the first to identify “clean blood” (*limpieza de sangre*) as a requirement of full citizenship. Gómez Izquierdo asserts that, “the principle of *limpieza de sangre* converted the colonies into the first modern society based on the racial differentiation of individuals and groups” (2001: 29). So while Spain may not have “perfected” institutions that evolved into “Jim Crow” and Apartheid, it was among the earliest practitioners of a doctrine of a racial hierarchy.

B. Spanish Slavery in Mexico: 16th-18th Centuries

Africans accompanied the Spaniards in their earliest explorations of the New World. Legend has it that one African slave introduced the cultivation of wheat to the New World and that another introduced the virus or bacteria that caused the decimation of the indigenous population (Capitaine 1988: 85; 1993: 133). Although its merchants played a relatively small role in the international slave trade, Spain was an active partner as a purchaser of human chattel. In 1542, just two decades after the conquest, the Spanish crown outlawed Indian slavery due to the efforts of Bartolomé de las Casas and other clerics. However, Las Casas made the morally untenable suggestion that African slaves be employed to ease the burden on the Indians who were considered frail, especially as they were dying by the millions due to imported European diseases. Capitaine notes that “Fray Bartolomé de las Casas was a driving force behind the introduction of African slaves to the New World with the object of defending the Indians. He came to regret this decision later in his life” (1993: 133). But as Lewis Hanke points out, while las Casas may have belatedly and privately regretted his advocacy of African slavery he never publically opposed it (Hanke 1959: 9). One black worker was considered the equal of as many as four Indians (Palmer 1973: 69) and consequently Spain granted *asientos*, or licenses to regulate the slave trade and bring more Africans into its colony. After 1580 with the temporary reunification of the kingdoms of Spain and Portugal, Africans were brought in bondage to Spanish America predominantly through the agency of Portuguese slavers. Because of the lack of a large, identifiable Afromexican population, the extent of the slave trade in Mexico is often underestimated. But Colin Palmer estimates that “the total number of slaves who went to New Spain [Mexico] may well have been in excess of 150,000” (30). Other commentators put the figure at 200,000. (Although Jameelah S. Muhammad asserts that “more than 500,000 Africans were brought to Mexico,” I have found no corroboration

of this statistic (1995b, 164.) Patrick Carroll writes that, “from about 1580 to 1620, roughly two generations, New Spain imported more African slaves than any other locale in the Americas” (Carroll 199: 145).

By the 18th Century, the British had gained control of the slave trade. Capitaine writes that the trade in Veracruz was controlled by three “Englishmen named Luis Haiz, Guillermo Buttler, and Enrique Spencer, who hispanicized their names in Veracruz” (Capitaine 1993: 134). This coincides with most thinking that places Great Britain at the forefront of the Slave Trade during this era. Britain’s status of supremacy as the leading sea power and slave-trading nation should have eroded the legacy of *La Leyenda Negra*, which paints Spain as the cruelest of the colonial powers, if only by way of comparison, but Anglo- and American historiography has yet to fully divest itself of an anti-Hispanic bias. There’s an old racist saying, “Africa begins at the Pyrenees,” which perfectly sums up the Anglo, American, and other European biases against Spain and things Hispanic. The comment continues to underpin much of what is written about Spain, and Latin America. At the same time, it suggests a closeness of Iberians and Africans that may contain more than an element of truth.

As mentioned above, the number of indigenous fell from an estimated 20 million in 1521 to an estimated 2-3 million a century later. While Africans always outnumbered Spaniards in the colonial era, these numbers make it clear that the Indians remained a vast majority, despite the dramatic decline in their population. With some justice, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán calls this demographic catastrophe, a “genocide” (1958: 29-40). African slaves were brought to New Spain to partially offset this depopulation, compounding one human disaster with another. In the 16th century most of the slaves imported to Mexico came from the West African areas of what is today Senegal and Guinea-Bissau. By the 17th century most came from Angola, via Portuguese traders (Carroll 1990: 81).

C. African-Indigenous Relations: 16th through 18th Centuries

Christianity inherited the Judaic tradition of the Old Testament's hostility to nature and the corporeal. Nature was seen as an enemy to be tamed. Sardar, Nandy and Davies write that "even a casual reading of the Old Testament suggests an unambiguous view of the earth as hostile and of the duty of humanity to subdue it to their ends by force" (24). This philosophy had catastrophic consequences for the peoples of Africa and the New World, both of whom are renowned for their respect for their environment and the natural world in general. Sardar, et al. suggest that Africans and indigenous Americans were seen by the Europeans as part of nature, i.e. as part of a problem which had to be overcome by force. This philosophical view gave rise to colonialism and, according to some, the development of modern capitalism. But while Europeans considered both Africans and Indians as subject peoples, this did not translate into a cordial relationship between the two subaltern groups.

One of the ongoing tragedies of history is how a dominant group so often, consciously or not, sets members of diverse subordinate groups against each other, creating conditions for interethnic enmity that forces energy and attention away from the depredations of the common oppressor. The Spanish colonial policies of forced subjugation of the indigenous peoples coupled with the institution of African slavery, led inexorably to African-Indigenous conflicts. One reason for this was the unequal sex ratio among African slaves. Palmer (1973: 47) and other historians place the ratio at three men to every woman. This naturally led African men to seek wives outside of their own racial/ethnic group. When the first groups of blacks began to escape (*cimarrones*) and form their own villages (*palenques*), they carried this unequal sex ratio with them into their mountain and jungle hideouts. The unnatural situation led the *cimarrones* to raid indigenous villages in search of women, as well as food and other supplies. According to María Guadalupe Chávez, "relations between blacks and Indians in the first stage of

colonization were not exactly harmonious” (1993:104). “An undetermined number of slaves” she writes, freed themselves through escape and *cimarronaje* and “among the characteristics of *cimarronaje* were the frequent attacks on indigenous communities” (1993: 104). Chávez quotes 16th century colonial authorities: “Blacks robbed chickens and many times took women and children. This caused the depopulation of many villages” (qtd. 1993:105). Chávez quotes the *Leyes Ordenanzas reales de las Indias del mar Océano (cedulario de 1574)* on blacks “taking women and children by force and against their will and doing other bad deeds that have caused and continue to cause much damage and inconvenience” (qtd. 1993:105). As late as a generation later, in the early 17th century, in Michoacan, travelers reported “many indians, very *ladino*-looking, living with mulatos” (qtd. 1993:106). The unequal sex ratio among Africans in the early years of slavery in Mexico may account for much of the subsequent race mixing that developed over the centuries. It may also account for some residual hostility between African and indigenous communities, especially on La Costa Chica (Lewis 2000).

Another instance of the uneasy relationship between Afromexican and indigenous people can be seen in the example of free blacks in the colonial militia (see below). These black soldiers served as a sort of Praetorian Guard for the Spanish Empire, protecting it from foreign invasion and also subduing civil disorders in the colony. Vinson records that black troops put down the insurrection of 1729 in Mexico City and that they were also employed to apprehend fugitives from colonial justice (2001: 66). This cannot have endeared them to the majority indigenous and mestizo population.

D. The Decline of Slavery in Mexico.

Regarding slavery as it existed in colonial Mexico, Aguirre Beltrán maintains that the institution died from “natural causes.” He stresses the increasing economic nonviability of slavery as the advances of capitalism opted for free labor (*mano de obra libre*) over slave labor. This diversion from slave to free labor reflects, of course,

the employers' freedom from the obligation to feed, house, and clothe their workers and the willingness to allow market forces to give the formerly enslaved the freedom to "work or starve" at the going rate. Beltrán does not accept the belief that Spanish slavery was any more humane than the Anglo institutions to the north. He simply remarks on the different circumstances—the lack of a plantation economy (outside of certain areas of the sugar industry), the unsuitability of slavery for the mining and textile industries, and the declining need for domestic servants, etc.—that led to the self-destruction of slavery in New Spain. If there is a criticism to be leveled at his interpretation of the demise of slavery in Mexico, it is that it does not give sufficient credit to the efforts of Afromexicans themselves to end the institution. These efforts, which the current Afromexicanistas cover extensively, are discussed below.

Aguirre Beltrán believes that slavery declined due to general economic and social factors, and that the slaves' actions on their own behalf were less effective than other historical forces. Bertrán writes that "Abolition was a legal decision taken after the fact of the disappearance of slavery" and that "from the economic perspective, slavery as a social system and a mode of production had ended a century earlier." (qtd. in de la Serna 2001: 101). Some contemporary Mexican scholars disagree. Juan M. de la Serna H. writes that, "above all, we must underline the attitude of resistance of the slaves themselves for their notable tenacity in the struggle for their freedom" through legal or extra-legal means (2001: 116). Naveda and others stress the active role of the slaves in their own liberation. Generally, there were three major mechanisms by which a slave could obtain freedom in colonial Mexico: 1) by purchase or by voluntary manumission by the slave-owner; 2) by *cimarronaje* or *huida* or *altzamiento* (escape and insurrection); and 3) by service in the colonial militias. The latter option applied primarily to already-freed black men in the 18th century but occasionally a slave could avail himself of this option.

1. Ways of Escape: Purchase and Manumission

In her search of the archives in Córdoba, Orizaba, and Xalapa, Naveda discovered 356 *cartas de libertad* (letters of freedom) written by owners granting freedom to their slaves for various reasons. Most of these cases come from the late 18th century when slavery was on the decline in Mexico due to economic forces, the influence of Enlightenment ideas, and other factors. Naveda reports that “the influence of liberal currents had infiltrated the Metropole,” leading to a more critical view of slavery (1993: 95). Of the 356 cases, 114 represent cases in which the owner received a financial gain in exchange for freeing the slave. In the majority of these cases, according to Naveda, the slave purchased his/her own freedom. This often happened in the late 18th century after the laws governing slavery were liberalized in 1789 decreeing that slaves be given two hours a day for personal manufacturing or other work. The same set of laws also outlawed the branding of slaves by fire. According to Naveda, “The mere fact of this law illustrates the change in the attitudes toward and the conditions of slavery” (1993: 96). While acknowledging a liberalization in Spanish colonial policy, Naveda nevertheless asserts that a more enlightened administration would not have significantly improved conditions without the struggle of the Afromexicans themselves. Often these struggles found expression in appeals to existing judicial authorities.

Nearly always, the slaves who purchased their own freedom were men and women between the ages of 16 and 45, representing their most productive years when they may have availed themselves of their “free time” to acquire savings to buy their freedom (1993: 92). In some cases the slave was able to purchase his/her freedom in installments by giving the owner, for example, three pesos per month for a period of a few years. Naveda also found cases of a relative buying the freedom for a slave (1993: 93).

Naveda writes of “the massive incorporation of the slaves of Córdoba in the War of Independence [on the side of Hidalgo] which was then the last pull in a process that

politically altered” the conditions of slavery (1993: 95). (On the other hand, Alvaro Ochoa Serrano notes that conservative historian Lucas Aleman reported that “the free black soldiers of La Costa Chica maintained loyalty to the Spanish government until the end of the regime in 1821. [1995:171]). In the period immediately preceding, during and after (1810-1830) the War of Independence, and before the official emancipation by President Vincent Guerrero (reputed to be of African ancestry himself) in 1829, “new legal forms to obtain freedom” are encountered in the archives (Naveda, 1993: 95).

In addition to Naveda’s examination of the *mecanismos* for gaining freedom in Veracruz, María Guadalupe Chávez Carabajal has researched the same subject but in the state of Michoacan (1993). Chávez Carabajal finds much evidence of a deathbed discharge of conscience (*descargo de conciencia*) among 18th century slave owners in Michoacan (Chávez Carabajal 1993: 102). The wills usually stated that the slave was being granted freedom for “buen servicios” (1993: 102). Other cases show the futility of waiting for a *descargo de conciencia* on the part of the slave owner. One case, encountered in my own archival research, may illustrate this futility and also the sketchy nature of certain documents in archives. The Archivo Notarial de Xalapa (ANX) houses municipal documents from around the state of Veracruz dating from the 16th century. Many of these documents are last wills and testaments containing inventories of property. Don Francisco Hidalgo Guerrero filed two wills, one in 1774 and another in 1776, in Tantoyuca in Northern Veracruz. In the 1774 will, he listed among his property, “one negro slave named Manuel Antonio valued at 150 pesos,” and another “named Francisco de los Angeles, already old” valued at only 25 pesos. Also listed are two women, Maria Celidonia valued at 137 pesos and Juana Rosalia, valued at 100 pesos. Of the four slaves, only Francisco de los Angeles is indicated by age as “already old.” The slaveowner, Guerrero, revised his will which was filed in 1776, the year of his death. In the 1776 will, he grants freedom to Manuel Antonio and Maria Celidonia (*mando se les*

la libertad) but there is no mention of Francisco de los Angeles or Juana Rosalia. This leaves the researcher to wonder if perhaps Francisco, “already old” in 1774, died in the intervening two years without ever having gained his freedom. And if Juana Rosalia perhaps was sold to another owner or died herself. Whatever may have happened to these two slaves, the *descargo de consciencia* apparently did them little good (ANX).

Chávez Carabajal maintains however that in some cases when a will was not honored the slave subsequently sued, successfully, for his/her freedom. This coincides with the findings of Juan M. de la Serna H. that “there were increasing judicial demands (lawsuits, etc.) from the second half of the 18th century in which the freedom of the slave was the central issue” De la Serna believes that this new freedom to engage the courts “reveals one of the most characteristic features of the urban culture of resistance and the struggle for freedom” (115-116). Capitaine cites some examples of Spanish collaboration with blacks, even *cimarrones*, such as “priests, owners of ranchers and farmers of cacao and vanilla who occasionally employed them” (1988: 87). In addition, the receptivity of the civil and religious bureaucracies to petitions by slaves proved another sign of the decline in the credibility of the institution. “Until now,” writes de la Serna, “the role of the bureaucracy has been underestimated. The bureaucracy ruled constantly on questions of the life of the slaves. The ecclesiastical judge was a central figure” (116). Yet de la Serna insists that this new leniency was not simply a benevolent gesture and that it would not have surfaced without the constant agitation by slaves for their freedom. This is echoed by comments by Maria Elena Cortés Jácome who writes that “slaves, though illiterate, knew their rights and how to struggle to have them respected” (1993: 53).

Returning to Chávez Carabajal’s work, she also records that many slaves bought their freedom at a high monetary price and went back to work on their old haciendas, and that some eventually became prosperous farmers themselves. She also reports the

existence of “a small group of freed slaves [who] purchased their own slaves, either blacks or mulatos” (1993: 103).

2. Ways of Escape: *Cimarronaje*

Africans never peacefully accommodated themselves to the regime of slavery. They resisted through any means, legal or otherwise, that came to hand. An old racist notion contends that Africa was always a continent of slaves, that slavery was rampant there because Africans were naturally docile and submissive in the face of superior force. In contrast to this racist view, Montiel Martínez points out a fact that is well known to many historians, that slavery, when it existed in Africa, followed the pattern of “classical slavery,” that “in many towns the slaves seemed more as temporary conscripted workers; in other places slaves were treated as members of the family, and in many areas of Africa, slavery was totally unknown” (2001: 233-34). She concludes that, “it is a fallacy, then, to affirm that the slave trade only continued a pre-existing practice” (2001: 234). The affirmation of this fallacy was used to justify a way of thinking which the slave-owners knew only too well, from continual experience of African rebellion, did not apply to reality.

The legendary story of the rebellion of Yanga (alternately Ñanga or Nyanga) provides the best illustration of African resistance to Spanish slavery. The history of this incident is already well-known to both Mexican scholars and the public through the accounts of Mexican historians and anthropologists, as well as through the annual festival in the town which celebrates its founding. The following paragraphs will recount the story of Yanga’s insurrection and is taken from information from published sources by Aguirre Beltrán (1947, 1988), Davidson (1973); Naveda (1987), Miguel García Bustamante (1988), and Sagrario Cruz (2002). There is some variation in the accounts due to the inconclusive nature of the sources but there is general agreement on the nature of Yanga’s insurrection.

The history of this incident was recorded by a contemporary Jesuit historian, Juan Laurencio who was captured by Yanga and served as a mediator between the *cimarrones* and the Spanish authorities. His original account has not survived but Aguirre Beltrán and other researchers rely on a copy of the original made in 1654, and another contemporary account, that of Fray Alonso de Benavides, which refers to and supports Laurencio's (Aguirre Beltrán 1988: 132). Davidson appears to be the first scholar to relate the story in detail in English (1973: 94-98). Yanga, said to be "aging" by 1607, was an African, believed to hail from an Akan-speaking area in the Asanti kingdom of present-day Ghana. He is said to have been of royal blood, or at least capable of being king had he remained in his own land. He was captured on an unknown date in the late 16th century and sold into slavery. Transported to New Spain he quickly escaped and became a sort of chief to other runaway slaves, who called themselves "Yanguicos" (Davidson 1973: 94). Yanga is said to have been a fugitive for some 30 years by the time of the uprising of 1607-08. He is described by Juan Laurencio, the priest held prisoner by the *cimarrones*, in the following terms:

Yanga was a black of graceful body, from the nation of Bran (Ghana) and of whom it is said that if he was not captured he would have been king of his people in Africa. He has lofty ideals of which the first was the rebellion of thirty years ago and since that time, with his authority and good manner, those of his color have enlarged his party considerably.

(qtd. by Bustamante, 1988: 221)

Yanga founded a settlement (or *palenque*) outside of Orizaba, closer to present-day Córdoba which was not founded until a decade after Yanga's rebellion. The settlement was frequently moved to avoid searches by colonial authorities. The *cimarrones* would build temporary housing, plant crops, and raise livestock, moving to a new location after the harvest. Laurencio noted that the *palenque* was well-organized and well-armed and

that the people of the community practiced Catholicism in a makeshift chapel in their mountain compound.

After being captured by the *cimarrones*, Laurencio was brought before Yanga who instructed him to deliver a letter of defiance to the Spanish. Later, the priest returned with Spanish forces attempting to storm the *palenque* and kill or capture its leader, and was wounded by an arrow in the attack. The Spanish succeeded in taking the town but found it deserted, the inhabitants having escaped further into the mountains. From his new hideout, Yanga sent a note to Captain Pedro Gonzalo de Herrera commanding the Spanish forces, vowing to continue the fight. Herrera sought negotiations and Yanga, after refusing for several more days, finally agreed to enter into peace talks. The Spanish captain and the *cimarron* leader came to terms which are recorded in a document entitled *Las condiciones que piden los negros Simarrones de est Comarca*. Yanga agreed to cease his raids on Spanish and indigenous villages and travelers. The Spanish agreed that Yanga and all slaves who had already escaped be declared free. The Spanish agreed to a permanent settlement, San Lorenzo de los Negros, which was off limits to all Spaniards except on market days, with the exception of one Spanish judge. Yanga was named governor and the Spanish agreed that his descendants would succeed him in that capacity. The agreement was ratified by the Spanish crown sometime between 1608 and 1630 (Naveda 1987, Aguirre Beltrán 1988). San Lorenzo de los Negros was renamed after its original founder during the height of the anti-Catholic movement in 1932 when the government gave new designations to many cities named after saints (Sagrario Cruz, interview).

Uprisings and escapes represent an ongoing and uninterrupted pattern of resistance to colonial slavery. (See Cope, 1994, on 17th century *tumultos* in the capital.) Naveda asserts that “Escape, sabotage of production, and *cimarrones* were a constant challenge to the *hacendados* who spent a good deal of energy and money in trying to combat

them” (1988: 263). The first uprisings occurred within a decade of the conquest and continued with regularity until the War of Independence. Yanga’s successful escape and leadership of the *palenque* near Orizaba in 1609 is an indication of the Spanish authorities’ early recognition that escapes and uprisings would remain a permanent feature of Mexican society, one that they hoped to contain but were dubious that they could eradicate. “In fact,” writes Naveda of Córdoba, “the *hacendados* had to get used to coexisting with rebellious blacks who succeeded, through the means of political negotiations, in becoming free blacks” (1988: 263). Of course, the colonials were not comfortable with this permanent state of unrest and used draconian measures to attempt to subordinate blacks. The case of Córdoba provides a local example of the toll taken by slavery on colonial society at large. Naveda describes this as: “the inhuman treatment inflicted on the slaves, and the constant terror of white society of a possible general uprising” (1988: 263). Constant clashes between colonial authorities and armed employees of the haciendas on one side, and organized bands of *cimarrones* on the other, kept Córdoba in an uneasy balance between social war and peace until the wholesale defection of the slaves of Córdoba in answer to Hidalgo’s *Grito de Dolores* in the War of Independence in 1810.

Major *tumultos* occurred in 1700, 1733 and 1766, in a century in which slavery was declining and opportunities for legal freedom were increasing. Free blacks, *castas*, and slaves joined together in opposition to colonial authorities. Chavez Carabajal asserts that “These movements demonstrated the rejection of the orders of the Metropole, above all the recruitment by the provincial militias and the payment of new and excessive taxes, a situation aggravated by the expulsion of the Jesuits the year before” (1993: 107). The Jesuits, although land- and slaveholders themselves had come into conflict with the crown. One of the points of contention was the issue of slavery. Of the Jesuits reputed concern for the victims of Spanish colonialism, Sardar, Nandy, and Davies

write: “when they separated the Amerindians from the rapacious Spanish settlers, it did not mean giving them the liberty to do with themselves exactly as they pleased” (1993: 74). The same could be said of Jesuit attitudes toward Africans.

Naveda reports that the uprising of 1709 in Córdoba rekindled “the cyclical worry of the *hacendados*” of a “massive assault” in the offing (1987: 132). This fear was realized in 1735 with the largest slave uprising yet seen in that city. The repression of that year spread into the countryside and engulfed *palenques* that had been established many years before (1987: 132). Naveda quotes a contemporary source, “On June 19, upwards of 500 armed blacks from the haciendas” rose up in San Juan de la Punta near Córdoba. The viceroy and the Royal Audience appeared to behave magnanimously but shortly after they exacted bloody reprisals against the *altazamientos*. The rebellion continued and the King himself proposed a political solution “to put in liberty the rebel blacks who would surrender and become prisoners” (qtd. by Naveda 1987: 135). The rebels rejected the proposal and continued their fight and were finally defeated by superior forces. The leaders were executed publicly in 1737. Some rebels escaped into the nearby *palenques* of Mazatiopan and Soyaltepec. The authorities in Córdoba declined to pursue them. Thirty years later a delegation of *hacendados* issued the following statement describing the ruin caused by the uprising of 1735: “The seditious movement of general uprising of all the slaves in this region cost much money, spilled much blood, and ruined the country in a manner from which it has yet to recover” (*Archivo General de la Nación*, “Tierras,” vol. 3543, fs. 77-78, qtd. by Naveda, 1987: 136). Naveda concludes that “in reality, the uprising of 1735 was never extinguished” (1987: 138). Its effects continued to chip away at the institution of slavery. Later in the century, the colonial authorities were forced to seek protection, in the form of defense forces recruited from the black population, from the very same people they had so recently been oppressing. Historical events in the 18th century led to the irony of

Afromexican involvement in the colonial militias, the very forces which had so recently been pursuing them.

3. Ways of Escape: The Militia

Recent studies have focused on blacks in the colonial “national guard.” Defense forces were established in Puebla, Veracruz, Mexico City, Guadalajara, and other locations in New Spain, particularly in the 18th century to guard against invasions by rival powers, especially the British. According to Capitaine:

During the frequent international conflicts between Spain and the rest of the European powers, a growing preoccupation was to defend the coasts in all of Spanish America. For this reason, companies of provincial militias were installed which emphasized black lancers, installing them at points of vigilance in the principal ports of the Atlantic Coast, such as Tamiahua, Nautla, Veracruz, and Alvarado. (1993: 139)

Vinson reports on the irony of this situation. The Spanish had long hoped to employ blacks in a predominantly white national guard. To this end, as early as 1600 in Cuba for example, there were “100 pardos and morenos libres” in the colonial army (2001: 63). The Spanish had good reason for wishing to keep black troops in the minority. Vinson continues: “The royal authorities were afraid to arm the black population, thinking that they would rebel against the imperial government” (2001: 63). But due to the aversion of the white population toward military service, Afromexican troops grew into a majority. Naveda, as mentioned above, refers to “the denomination of *Milicias de Pardos y Morenos libres*, the military body composed largely of blacks and mulatos (2001: 202).” Vinson cites a source which claims that of “848 men in the provincial regiment of Tampico and Pánuco, 806 were pardos” (2001: 65).

The fears of some whites were realized as the number of black troops steadily rose. Vinson cites “confrontations with local authorities in Puebla during the decade of the

'20s in the 18th century" (66). The municipal authorities accused the black troops of abusing their power, especially during their night patrols of the city" (*rondas de noche*) and "committing crimes against the population" (66). The Poblano city fathers sought to abolish the night patrols but the militias appealed to the viceroy who attempted to placate both sides. The black troops were too important to disband but the viceroy attempted to appease the local authorities by having some soldiers jailed for "abuses." However, he allowed them to continue their rounds but stipulated that they occasionally be accompanied by a small squadron of white soldiers (2001: 66-67).

Vinson points to the fact that by the late 18th Century "Mexico possessed one of the largest free-colored populations in Spanish America" (Vinson 2000: 269) and finds that, with the threat of foreign invasion (particularly by the British) the Spanish Crown was forced to see the logic of wholesale recruitment of blacks into its defense forces. This royal necessity had the effect of increased social mobility for free blacks. Vinson, who also writes in Spanish, asserts:

The literature has expressed that military service could be a means of social 'whitening.' Many investigators believe by becoming a member of the militia a black man increased his marriage options, with the results that darker *castas*, could choose wives of a lighter skin color, particularly white wives, because of the social prestige of serving in the militias.
(2001: 75)

Service in the militias, thus provided an opportunity for social mobility for free blacks who had swelled the ranks of the homeless in many cities of central Mexico as the need for slave labor decreased. Military service provided an income to many Afromexican men as well as the opportunity to "marry up." Vinson reports that black men in Puebla married white women a mere 2% of the time in 1720. By 1790-92, this figure had risen to 21% (2001: 75). Guillermina del Valle Pavón adds: "Some

‘afromestizos’ achieved a place in late colonial society by their participation in the militias which permitted them to supercede the marginal situation in which they found themselves, and to achieve a degree of fiscal, judicial, social and military privilege.” (2001: 94) But as with slaves who purchased their freedom, relatively few blacks could avail themselves of the opportunity of a military career. As Capitaine writes, “These individual cases that break the general rule command attention,” but “in comparison with their brothers and sisters, they constituted an elite with freedom of territorial and economic movement” (1993: 139).

E. Colonial Sexuality

1. Difficulties of Marriage for Afromexicans

Many commentators claim that Spanish and Portuguese slavery was less harsh than British slavery. As mentioned previously, some point to the Arabic traditions of the Iberian peninsula and its allegedly more benign approach to the institution of slavery. David M. Davidson states that Spanish crown policy was “rooted in the Iberian heritage, which had long allowed slaves a legal and moral personality” and points to “royal concern for slaves as Spanish subjects and Catholic souls” (85). Davidson continues by stating:

Thus royal decrees and Church proclamations provided legal release from bondage by allowing the slaves to purchase their freedom and by encouraging voluntary manumission. Such declarations served equally to give substance to the Spanish belief in the essentially transitory nature of slavery and in the humanity of the slave. (85)

Despite this official policy, manumission was rare and royal hypocrisy was obvious, especially in cases where African men married Indian women to gain freedom only to find that these unions, which were directly addressed by the Crown, did not grant them freedom. However, when African men married Indian women they could at

least guarantee their children's freedom and the Crown could do nothing about this, according to Davidson. There was no law forbidding sexual relations between the races and the population of *zambos*, persons of mixed African and Indian heritage, continued to grow.

While laws on the books gave consent to the free marriage of slaves, in practice this was severely circumscribed. In an essay on the "conjugal rights of slaves," Cortés Jácome, again perhaps reflecting a Hispanophilic bias, comments on the "relatively liberal" Medieval codes that governed slavery in Spain, *el Fuero Juzgo* and *Las Siete Partidas* (referred to by Naveda above) which were transported to the New World (1993: 54). As she puts it, playing on the Spanish word, "conjugar," for uniting or coupling, "the crown and the church wanted to marry the exploitation and Christian charity" (*la Corona y la Iglesia deseaban conjugar la explotación y la caridad cristiana*) (1993: 56). Cortés Jácome cites cases where married slaves were denied permission to live together despite laws to the contrary.

Cortés Jácome documents another case that demonstrates the arbitrary obstructions by slaveowners of the marriage plans of their slaves, even when the slave wished to marry a free black. The case occurred in Mexico City in 1663 when *Las Siete Partidas*, dating from Medieval Spain, guaranteeing slaves the right to marry against the wishes of their owners, were still on the books. The case concerns Antón Manuel, a 40-year-old free black, born in Angola (we do not know how he obtained his freedom) and Maria, also around 40, the slave of a monk. Both were widowed and wished to marry. The monk challenged the nuptials filed by Antón Manuel with the ecclesiastical authorities forcing Maria, sequestered in the convent, to make a false statement claiming she was too old to marry (the statement exaggerated her age from 40 to 50) and that she wished to spend the rest of her life in the convent. Antón Manuel knew his rights and appealed to the ecclesiastical authorities asking them to "take her from the convent and be brought

face-to-face with me” (qtd. 1993: 65). After counterappeals and more intimidation by the monk who by this time had transferred ownership of Maria to a female associate, Antón Manuel continued to press the case for his marriage to Maria. The ecclesiastical authority of Archbishop Don José de Neira y Quiroga finally arranged an interview with Maria and found that she was subject to “fear and shame by her owner and at present she wishes to marry the abovementioned [Antón Manuel]” (qtd. 1993: 66). As Cortés Jácome comments: “This change of conduct was the fruit of the tireless labor of Antón Manuel who would not concede defeat in the face of the indecision and fear of his fiancée” (1993: 66-67). This case had a relatively benevolent outcome. Cortés Jácome attributes this to several factors:

First, the black Antón Manuel was a free subject who knew the legal mechanisms of the Church in matters of marriage; secondly, his firm character that enabled him to untangle a difficult social situation, overcoming the difficulties placed in his way by Maria’s owners. Finally, much weight should be given to the attitude of the ecclesiastical authorities who assisted greatly in the project of marriage. (1993: 67)

This episode demonstrates the problems that slaves and free blacks had in getting the authorities to invoke the provisions of law which permitted their free marriage. The “happy ending” to the case of Antón Manuel and María probably represents a rarity. The system of slavery anywhere allows for too many abuses, however “enlightened” the laws may be that govern it. There is no way to know how many similar cases came to grief because of obstruction by slaveowners, the indifference of the church, or the lack of a petitioner with the skill and zeal of Antón Manuel.

2. Black and Mulata Women and Transgressive Sexuality

Afromexican women were often the targets of persecution for allegedly committing “sexual crimes” and were occasionally brought before the Holy Office. Both Cortés

Jácome (1988) and Laura Lewis (1999) write of cases from as early as the 16th Century. Luz Alexandra Cárdenas Santana, in an intriguing essay, “La transgresión erótica de Cathalina González, Isabel de Urrego y Juana María” (2001), writes of three *mulata* women accused of witchcraft in 17th century Acapulco. The women were denounced to the Inquisition for “bewitching men by giving them their menstrual blood toasted on a grill, or the sperm of a dog mixed with chocolate” (*embaucaban a los hombres dándoles su sangre menstrual tostada en un comal, o bien esperma de perro, mezclados con chocolate.*) (2001: 40). As Cárdenas Santana notes, “It was easy to make a person ingest anything by giving it to him or her in chocolate because of the frequent use of this drink in the 17th century” (40-41). (The confluence of chocolate and sexuality is discussed below.) Cárdenas Santana uses this case as a point of departure to discuss the relation of female sexuality with class status throughout the colonial period. Cárdenas Santana sees free Afromexican women in the port as representatives of a forbidden sexuality and adds that, in the case she describes, there was some truth to this. “The sailing ships coming into port were awaited with enthusiasm by the *mulatas* and their friends” (*Las naos son esperadas con entusiasmo por las mulatas y sus amigas*) (2001: 52) This knowledge of the carnal on the part of Afromexicans was both envied and feared by Spanish and Creole women, according to Cárdenas Santana. “The body of these women represents the space of the transgression and the confines of the realization of sin” (2001: 47). Cárdenas Santana sets up the dichotomy of the “devout woman” (*beata*) and the “enchantress” (*hechicera*). “The enchantresses, in this case *mulatas*, are erotically active and possess a knowledge of sexuality and human sentiments” (2001: 55). For the Creole women “the only way to secure a social space was through marriage” and she had to “have a good dowry, and be a virgin and virtuous” (2001: 55). At times, the Creole woman sought the advice of the *mulata* who was expected to have a more complete knowledge of the erotic which the *beata* needed to satisfy her chosen man. As Cárdenas

Santana explains it: “The workings of love are the point of union of the *beatas* and the *hechiceras*. Jealousy, abandonment, the search for love, brought the ‘well-behaved’ woman to solicit the advice of *mulatas* who knew the techniques of love. It was a fair exchange for these women.” (2001: 55)

Cárdenas Santana’s essay is interpretative and seems to owe much to the ideas of Michel Foucault. It provides an illuminating example of the directions taken in current Mexican historical anthropology. She exonerates the three accused women and remarks on the change in historical attitudes during the colonial era toward transgressive sexualities:

These women were considered witches for their sexual transgression, but at the beginning of the 19th century, periferal and unproductive sexualities, such as onanism, incest and sodomy, underwent a change in status and became considered diseases. (2001: 48)

The case of these three women, hauled before the Inquisition in Acapulco, is just one of many such cases on record. It reflects a belief, held by many to this day in North, Central and South America and in much of Europe as well—that black women are the repositories of the carnal and therefore dangerous. The myth of the Jezebel is very much alive in the Western mind. And though Cárdenas Santana’s essay supports the Aframerican women in this case, some of her comments may seem to agree that these women were more skilled in the “erotic arts,” thus inadvertently replicating, in a more benign form, the Othering of women of color in historical discourse.

3. *Casta* Paintings

A singular Mexican art form of the 17th and 18th centuries features many depictions of Africans and *castas*. These *casta* paintings usually feature a man (usually white), with a woman (usually of a different race), and their child. These paintings purport to depict the results of miscegenation and the exoticism of life in general in

Mexico. According to the magazine, *Artes de Mexico*, the *casta* paintings show a way of life:

[W]here fruits and vegetables show their exoticism in a parallel line with the exoticism of the *castas* [...] full of features of 'diversity.' *Mestizos* and *avocados*, *mulatos* and *guanáberas*, mountains and palm trees, flowers and lush rivers, strange dress and guitars form this vision of the land and the life of America. (1990: 19)

As Margarita de Orellana writes, "It was in this society, where almost everyone mixed with everyone else, in a New Spain whose novelty was precisely this mixture, that *casta* paintings arose" (1990: 85). De Orellana's comments lend validity and a degree of celebration to the fact of *mestizaje* and the paintings do indeed show a self-consciousness of ethnic plurality. Yet, at the same time, according to Ilona Katzew, "the idea of racial hierarchy is clearly at the heart of these works" (Katzew, N.D.). Race-mixing produced a blurring of social boundaries which alarmed many Spanish and Creoles. As Katzew writes, "Anxiety over this loss of control permeated much of Mexico's reality during the eighteenth century" (Katzew, N.D.). Here we can see differing perspectives on sociological content of the *casta* paintings. One cautiously celebrates them as an early acknowledgment of the reality of *mestizaje*; while the other stresses their hierarchical nature, their racial ideology and their service to a Creole and European elite.

Cope gives, perhaps, the most lucid rationale behind this decidedly aristocratic art form, when he writes that such paintings

attempted to confront and control the threat of *mestizaje* by presenting Mexico's racial divisions as objective...categories. The subjects' skin color, dress, and activities...all are meant to show that Mexico's racial groups were well-defined, natural, and inevitable. (1994: 161)

As if to illustrate the importance of this art form as an indicator of the hierarchical thinking of the time, a casta painting appears on the cover of *The Limits of Racial Domination*, Cope's study of plebeian society in Mexico City in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries,

While the paintings, commissioned by Spanish and Creole aristocrats, were undoubtedly intended to show European "blood" as superior to Indian and African, they present to a modern viewer an almost naive response to the fact of racial mixture in colonial Mexico. Many of the paintings attempt to depict the results of race mixes and have titles such as: "De Español e India produce Mestizo" (From Spanish and Indian is produced the Mestizo) and "De Español e Negra produce Mulata," and most often depict a Spanish man, a woman of a subaltern group (African or indigenous or some combination thereof) and their mixed-race child. Maria Elena Velázquez Gutiérrez presents an interpretative profile of some of these paintings in her essay, "Orgullo y Despejo," (2001). She attributes part of the reason for the proliferation of casta paintings to "the pseudoscientific curiosity that many men of this period indulged in" (2001: 28). The paintings, mostly from the late 18th century, demonstrate an attempt to apply new rationalist/scientific ideas to a taxonomy of human varieties, and can also be read as incidences of racial fetishism.

Many of the paintings depict daily life and common scenes and Velázquez sees this as reflection "of a society that recognizes itself, despite its classifications of hierarchy and segregation, as a product of mestizaje" (2001: 29). The "groups most ethnically mixed," she continues, were considered "less educated and more susceptible to vices and bad habits" (2001: 30). This identification of blacks and mulatos, especially women who are featured most prominently in colonial paintings, conforms to Cárdenas Santana's comments on women of color as more knowledgeable in the magical arts of the erotic. But Velázquez finds that the paintings, above all, demonstrate the qualities of

“pride and self-assurance” of these women (*orgullo y despejo*) (2001: 25). Here again, we might discern an inadvertent Othering of Afromexican women. Velázquez notes the hierarchical aspect of the casta paintings but at the same time finds a celebration of Afromexican women’s “pride” as an Other, which to some degree mutes her critique.

Despite laws forbidding Afromexican women from dressing in the same manner as either Spaniards or Indians (2001: 31-32), some who were married to, or cohabited with Spaniards were depicted as “free castas” and “wore gold, silk, long robes and pearls” (2001: 32). Velázquez quotes traveler Thomas Gage in the 17th century: “The dress and finery of the black women is so lascivious and their gestures and charms are so enthralling that there are many Spaniards, even of the highest class, who would leave their wives for these women” (qtd. 2001: 27). Earlier I noted how Vinson, Naveda and others remarked on the colonial militias as a means of “upward mobility” for Afromexican men. Marriage or cohabitation with European or Creole men provided a similar means to Afromexican women to improve their social and material condition. Velázquez notes that there were many “denunciations of women of African origin for living in common-law marriage (*amancebamiento*) with Spaniards or other Europeans” (2001: 33). Some of the casta paintings do, indeed, depict relatively privileged Afromexican women, yet most of them render female domestic servants and common workers dressed more simply.

Velázquez notes the presence and importance of chocolate in many of these depictions. Velázquez asks, “What association can be found between chocolate and African women?” and “What possible symbols and relations are behind these scenes?” Velázquez cites the popular association of “the black color of chocolate with African women” but sees this as only part of the story (2001: 34). She cites Bernal Diaz del Castillo’s 16th century account to demonstrate that the earliest conquistadors associated chocolate with “access to women” (*acceso con mujeres*) (qtd. 2001: 34). She cites

historical documents showing the relationship between supposed witchcraft or enchantment (*hechicería*) and chocolate, such as the Acapulco case discussed above. Velázquez presents a case in 17th century Chiapas in which Afromexican women allegedly tried “to poison the bishop through chocolate” and to “break the will of those who would not succumb to their caprices” (35). Velázquez concludes that “the presence of chocolate in the scenes of *castas* in which African women are represented is not gratuitous but, perhaps, reflects the ‘myths and stereotypes’ existing in this epoch of these women’s magical gifts and attractive sexuality” (35). Here again, Velázquez seems to accept the depiction of Afromexican women’s sexuality as “magical,” thereby replicating, perhaps unconsciously, some hegemonic discourse.

Another affirmation of the relationship between Afromexican female sexuality and chocolate can be found in the popular *jarocho* (discussed below) song, “La María Terolerolé,” whose origins are lost in antiquity. The song presents the voice of a person in love with María, a person who “breathes for this woman” (*suspiro por esa dama*), and refers to “the two of us bringing chocolate to the bed” (*nos llevan a los dos / el chocolate a la cama*). The song says, “If you stir it for me, with pleasure I will take it.” This loses much in the translation. The original words are: “*pero si usted me lo bate / con gusto lo tomaré.*” “Bate” here is derived from the verb “batir,” which means “to beat down on” or “to beat violently.” It is the verb used to describe the making of *mole*, the famous Mexican sauce which combines unsweetened chocolate, different types of chili peppers, peanuts, garlic, onions, tomatoes, and many other ingredients. Making *mole* is a laborious process and involves a long process of stirring a resistant mix. A person stirring *mole* in a large vat often puts his or her body into the movement, revolving it in a circular motion, and often appears to be dancing in place. The stirring movements suggests sexual activity. A common Mexican *piropo*, or sexist remark on the street, goes: *Si como lo muevas, lo bates. ¡Ay! ¡Que rico chocolate!* (a rough English

translation would be: “The way you move it, you really stir it up. Hot chocolate!”). Following Velázquez’s interpretation of the relation of chocolate and Afromexican sexuality, the words to the song, *si usted me lo bate / con gusto lo tomaré* and *el chocolate a la cama*, and its origins in colonial Veracruz, suggest a man’s attraction to an Afromexican woman. The song works whether we visualize the singer as an Afromexican, mestizo, or even a Spanish or Creole man or even a woman. The version of *La María Terolerolé* by the group Son de Madera, from which most of the above lyrics are taken, features female singers.

The survey of questions of female sexuality in legal documents and in comments on the casta paintings presented above indicates that Afromexican women have long been seen as both alluring and dangerous erotic objects. The legal cases demonstrate that they were often persecuted because of this perception while the casta paintings tend to celebrate this sexuality but most often only when a European male is the dominant figure. Current Afromexicanista discourse remains free of both these extremes but still sometimes persists in Othering these women even if it is meant as a tribute.

IV. Afromexico Today: Veracruz, Music and Two Towns

A. Music in Veracruz: *Jarocho* and *Danzón*

Writing in Ismael Reed's *Konch* magazine, musicologist, Ted Vincent states:

In all of Latin America, Mexico is the only country with a national culture. Everyone else has a folk culture. In Cuba and Brazil people get down with the folk through African culture. In Peru and Guatemala people get down with Indigenous culture....Mexico has MEXICO! It has taken national culture to a higher level. (*Konch*, accessed 30 May 2003)

While this remark may exaggerate the case, Mexican national cultural can boast a singularity in nearly every field from music and dance to literature and from the visual arts to cuisine. Mexico has so many musical traditions that they defy an accurate count. African contributions to New World music include, according to José Antonio MacGregor and Carlos Enrique Garcia: “*el son, el calipso, el reggae, la rumbia, el merengue, el danzón, el chachachá, el guaguanco, el bolero, el blues, el jazz, el rock, la rumba*” (1993: 168). The authors quote Pablo Neruda's tribute to the African origins of all New World music: “Without blacks the drums would not beat / Without blacks the guitars would not sound / [...] and I'm going to dance in the streets / with my black brothers in Havana” (qtd. 1993: 170).

Two musical traditions from the state of Veracruz, *jarocho* (mentioned above in connection with the song, “La María Terolerolé,”) and *danzón*, are enjoying a renaissance in Mexico. While the project of Nuestra Tercera Raíz cannot be credited with the revival of these traditional forms of musical expression, it lends increased credibility to the artists involved in them.

When many people think of the music of Veracruz, they think of the *jarocho* combo—the three men in white outfits and modified straw cowboy hats, playing harp, guitar and guitarron, and singing “La Bamba.” Purists, like anthropologist/performer

Lilith Alcantara of the band Obini-Añá, say this is commercialized *jarocho* that has evolved over the years, especially since the 1940s, to appeal to North American tourists. Alcantara, though mestiza, is a cultural Afromexicanista, who says, “before the issue of racism was raised in the past few decades, there was definitely racism in Mexico.” But, she continues, “we are becoming more conscious of racism” (2002: interview). Alcantara strongly identifies the African origins of *jarocho* and does not perform “La Bamba” because of its overcommercialization. American Chicano pop star Richie Valens had a rock-and-roll hit with “La Bamba” in the 1950s and the California Chicano group, Los Lobos, reprised the song in the 1990s. In the 1970s, according to Alcantara, *jarocho* began to go back to basics (2002: interview). Many musicians sought to bring it back to its traditions and eschew the clown-like outfits and supercharged tempo that many associate with it. The effort has achieved some success with the popularity of local groups, such as Son de Madera, in the Xalapa area whose concerts I attended several times in Xalapa. Members of this group are *jarocho* purists who hand-make their own instruments according to traditional knowledge. I stopped by their home to purchase their CD and discovered that it also served as an instrument-manufacturing workshop.

Jarocho was developed centuries ago, probably in the port of Veracruz, by African musicians. Often a marimbol, a typical African instrument, is featured in more traditional *jarocho*. According to Vincent, “La Bamba” is of certain African origin. Vincent maintains that this song’s “beat and phrasing defies modern musicologists” and that “[t]his quintessential ‘Mexican’ song and dance is too old for their analysis” (*Konch*). Regarding its African origins, Vincent says “It is dated to at least 1683 and historians show it was the creation of blacks in Veracruz who came from the town of MBamba in Angola, in that nation’s district of Bamba” (*Konch*, accessed 30 May 2003).

In May, 2001, the city of Alvarado in Veracruz held a festival honoring some of the artists who kept traditional *jarocho* alive in the second half of the 20th century. The

program honored Julián Cruz Figueroa, Alejandro Fierro Zamudio, René Rolando Rosas Santos, and Lino Chávez Zamudio. All these artists died in the last decade of the 20th century and Alvarado's tribute belatedly recognized their achievements (2001: *Huapango y Son Jarocho*).

Another once almost-forgotten but now increasingly popular traditional music of Veracruz is *danzón*, which has obvious Cuban and Caribbean influences. Says musician, Paulino Vazquez Carreto, "The music surges from Africa—tropical, happy music...*Danzón* comes from Cuba, which is a nation that has much in common with the nation of Africa. Africans play the drums and so do the Cubans" (2002: interview). Paulino, whose mother is from the Afromexican community of El Coyolillo, says, "The music comes to me from the blood of my mother. The Cubans and Africans are brothers in the blood and this blood flows in me also" (2002: interview). Paulino, leader of the band, Paulino y su Danzonera, also acknowledges jarocho, as one of his songs, "Linda Jarocha" demonstrates. While in Xalapa I attended several of this group's dance concerts. His band consists of seven pieces: guitar, bass, four horns, and drums. It is similar in sound and feel to the music from the film, *Buena Vista Social Club*, with an unmistakable Cuban element. Asked about the former decline in the popularity of *danzón*, Paulino says, "It *was* dying. But now the government is promoting it and there is much interest, especially in this region in the state of Veracruz" (2002: interview). It remains difficult to determine with any degree of accuracy how much this promotion of *danzón* has to do with efforts to recover the Afromexican heritage but it seems safe to assume there is some connection, especially as Veracruz's recently-inaugurated Afrocaribeño festival features *danzón* music. In addition, the state of Veracruz boasts one of the most successful of the regional companies of the Ballet Folklórico de México and *danzón* is featured prominently in their performances and the connections to Cuba are emphasized.

In addition to these two musical genres, the Universidad Veracruzana has its own more traditional jazz band which is directed by an African-American musician, Yekk Muzik, a familiar figure in Xalapa who is outspoken in his assertions of Mexican racism. Muzik is relatively dark-skinned and he was welcomed as a brother on our trips together to El Coyolillo which is ironic since the people there do not consciously self-identify as black. Yet their joy in seeing Yekk, who has old friends in the town, and the warmth of their greeting to him was unmistakable. Muzik is routinely consulted by visiting foreigners seeking insight into the Afromexican presence in Veracruz. Ironically, except for Muzik himself, the jazz band he leads is composed of mestizos. I believe this is a result of the lack of opportunities for higher education for the nearby Afromexican population. The Universidad Veracruzana is one of the institutions which produces the greatest number of Afromexicanista scholars. Yet it does not seem to have many Afromexican students.

In addition to *danzón* and *jarocho*, several other groups in the Xalapa area play music that is self-consciously inflected with African rhythms. One of these is Obini-Añá which played at the Coyolillo carnival in 2002. Lilith Alcantara of this band is also a student specializing in Afromexican studies at the Universidad Veracruzana. The music of Obini-Añá features a syncretic blend of *jarocho* and African drums. Another local group, *Son Mestizo*, features drums almost exclusively which are accompanied by female dancers performing African-influenced dances. The recognition of Afromexico is apparent in these musical expressions yet there do not seem to be “authentic” Afromexican performers in any of these ensembles, unless we can consider Paulino, with his *Coyoleña* mother, or the North American Yekk Muzik, as personifications of blackness. Indeed, the town of El Coyolillo hired mestizo musicians to play African-influenced music at their carnival. However, I believe that if and when Afromexicans themselves began to form musical groups, the mestizo population of Xalapa would be

disposed to receive them positively and to welcome them as “authentic” expressions of Afromexico.

Danzón and jarocho are far apart as musical styles. The former is a tropical, Caribbean, salsa type of music, while the later has a more folkloric feel. Yet both owe their origin to African influences. In addition, according to another musicologist, Rolando Pérez Fernández, Mexican music “is fundamentally the result of the transculturation between the Spanish and the blacks,” which may slight indigenous contributions but certainly contains much truth (qtd. in Muhammad, 1995: 174). Muhammad adds that “[t]raditional Mexican music finds its origin in the states that were heavily populated by black people: southern Jalisco, Michoacán, Guerrero, Oaxaca...Huasteco, Tabasco, Veracruz and northern Puebla” (1995: 174). The rediscovery of both danzón and jarocho certainly owes something to the program of *Nuestra Tercera Raíz*.

B. El Coyolillo

The village of El Coyolillo lies some 30 kilometers northeast of Xalapa in the present-day municipality of Acotopan. The municipality had a population in the year 2000 of 39,354. Like many rural Mexican communities, its population has declined in recent years (down from 40,541 in 1990) due mostly to emigration to the United States (*Censo de INEGI*, qtd. by Annabella Cruz). The village of Coyolillo rests on land that once belonged to the hacienda, Almolonga, founded in 1572. According to Gilberto Bermudez Gorrochotegui, in the sale of the hacienda in 1598 the following items were included in the inventory: “six Indian servants given to us by the viceroy” (Bermudez, 1994: 149). No black slaves are mentioned in this sale. However, when Almolonga was sold again in 1622, Bermudez records the purchase of “the first black slaves when new lands were opened for the cultivation of sugar and a sugar mill (*ingenio*) was installed.” (1994: 150)

Sugar industry in the area rose briefly in the 1590s to satisfy the local market “of the white and mestizo population” (1994: 233) in Puebla, Mexico, Veracruz, and other urban centers. The sugar industry in Almolonga declined throughout the 17th century due to increased production in other areas such as *ingenios* at the newly-constituted city of Córdoba. The internal market became saturated leading to a sharp decline in the price of sugar. Bermudez attributes this to “overproduction which saturated the internal market, the political protectionism of the Crown in favor of the plantations in the Caribbean, the prohibition of exports from Mexico, along with the decreasing demand and increased costs of production” (1994: 236). Tobacco gradually replaced sugar as the more attractive cash crop. By this time, there were many free blacks in the area. They were hired to work the tobacco farms. Slavery still prevailed, for the most part, in sugar production. According to Guillermina del Valle Pavón, the switch from sugar to tobacco was a factor in the declining slave population: “There was a notable reduction in the number of slaves during the colonial period because of the substitution of tobacco for sugar cane” (2001: 93). Naveda contends that since there were more free blacks by this time anyway, growers preferred to hire them than to keep slaves which they found to be more costly (interview).

According to Alfredo Martínez Maranto, the foremost expert on this community, between 1733 and 1798 there is evidence that the inhabitants of El Coyolillo were classified in the *casta* of *pardos*. Records in the Archivo Parroquial de Actopan indicated an Afromexican presence in many areas of the municipality, such as Omiquila, Rancho de las Animas, Pastoría, Chicoasén, San Nicolás, Santa Rosa, and Villa Rica, where the presence of free blacks (*pardos libres*) was also registered. (1994: 529). For the present day inhabitants of El Coyolillo, the memory of the plantation of Almolonga circulates as a kind of myth, according to which the slaves who worked there had the luck to encounter a buried treasure that was reclaimed by the owner of the *granjería*. He

offered liberty to the slaves in exchange for the treasure. They accepted the offer and settled in nearby El Coyolillo (1994: 529).

Some residents tell the story of the period of the Mexican Revolution during which an influx of “Cubans” who were escaping a siege of the enemies of Zapata, tried to unite with the people of El Coyolillo. Despite the ferocity of the assault, some were able to save themselves by hiding in the mountains and others escaped to more distant places, and “some ‘Cubans’ were arrested and liquidated” (1994: 529). For the Coyoleños (residents of El Coyolillo), history begins in the early years of the 20th century and extends to the agrarian movement of the 1920s and early 30s, when a landlord, known as “the black hand” (*la mano negra*), Manuel Parra, took over the hacienda of Almolonga in 1928 (1994: 529-30). Manuel Parra was a harsh landlord to the tenant farmers of El Coyolillo. Parra is said to have killed 40,000 campesinos. (Although the Mexican Revolution claimed over a million lives, this figure of 40,000, in such a small area, remains difficult to substantiate or believe.) The Coyoleños continued to work for Manuel Parra in an atmosphere of “violence and terror until the government forced the sale of the sugar mill. But this is only a small part of the history that, fundamentally, is unknown to Coyoleños” (1994: 531). Martínez Maranto finds evidence that the ancestors of the Coyoleños come from Africa but the community does not maintain a consciousness of this fact. Their African physical characteristics are attributed to the “Cuban” migration or a popular notion that “God colors as he wants to” (1994: 531).

Nearby landmarks, such as Cerro del Congo and Cerro del Valle de Mozambique strongly suggest an early African presence (1994: 553), as do other nearby place names with an African phonetic structure such as “Guarumbo and Gimba” (1994: 555). Martínez Maranto suggests that the proximity of Cerro del Congo (2 km) provides possible evidence of a Central African origin. He writes:

It is probable, then, that some of the slaves who lived, especially in the hacienda of Almolonga, were Africans captured on the margins of the Congo River, and were introduced into New Spain under the denomination of Maricongos, probably at the end of the 16th century.

During that period, each slave that was brought to New Spain was given the generic name of the tribal group of his origin. (1994: 554)

Martínez Maranto suggests that Cerro del Valle de Mozambique was originally named by African slaves who had heard of that area of their home continent but, agreeing with historians, believes that “few blacks from Mozambique were brought to New Spain” (554).

The first impression of the visitor is that the people of El Coyolillo are the result of centuries of race-mixing among African, European and Indigenous populations. In general, the indigenous presence is the least pronounced (personal observation). One striking aspect of many Coyoleños is that while their skin is very dark, they have pale blue-green eyes. Many people around Xalapa who have not visited El Coyolillo believe that the inhabitants are universally tall and black with blue eyes. Before my first trip to Coyolillo, several mestizo citizens of Xalapa told me that I must visit the town to see the “tall handsome blacks with the blue eyes.” Although that description exaggerates the case, many Coyoleños, particularly the men, have these traits in a modified form.

Martínez Maranto believes that “[a]pproximately 50% of the inhabitants of El Coyolillo have features that can be described as African” (1994: 534). Yet, despite the African phenotypical features, in general, Coyoleños deny that they are black. As mentioned above, Annabella Cruz cites one respondent: “They say we’re black, but we’re not black,” (*Dicen somos negros pero no somos negros*) (qtd. by Annabella Cruz, 2002). Yet Martínez Maranto quotes others who say “we are the brownest” (*mas moreno*) in the municipality of Actopan. And another who says, “here the race is brown”

(*moreno*) while the other villages “are very Spanish” (*están muy españoles*) or “they are another race” (*son de otra raza*) (556). The comments indicate that while Coyoleños deny they are “black,” they are conscious of their “racial difference.”

The Coyoleño is known for hospitality. This is a great source of pride and they feel it distinguishes them from surrounding towns which are not known for such receptivity to visitors. A Coyoleño will invite an outsider into his home for a hot meal, even if the visitor to the town is totally unknown to his host (Martínez Maranto, 1994: 549). I had read about this hospitality in Martínez Maranto’s essay and it was more than confirmed by personal experience. On our first visit to El Coyolillo we were offered full meals at three different homes. Alfredo had warned us to not eat too much at each house so as we would be able to consume enough at the the next home to avoid offending our hosts. On subsequent visits, without Alfredo, I was treated as an old friend and offered the same hospitality.

Each year during the pre-Lenten Carnaval, the overwhelmingly Catholic Coyoleños celebrate. Young men and children wear elaborate, quilted costumes and masks. They perform a dance known as *la negreada*, in which a group of celebrants cavort in their colorful costumes while wearing masks of wood representing cows or deer. Martínez Maranto sees these masks and other aspects of the Carnaval, including the use of musical instruments such as “guitarra, jarana, arpa y marimbol,” as well as jarocho music, as “various elements than can be interpreted as representations of the life of the slaves” (1991: 7). Representations such as these, along with the *casas redondas* in La Costa Chica, are seen as “traces of Africa” by many scholars. *Casas redondas* have been constructed on La Costa Chica, not as habitations, but as showcases for tourists and scholars. Despite the often dubious benefits of tourism, the time may come when Coyolillo’s “African” wooden masks become widely sold as handicrafts which would benefit the local economy and give recognition to the town’s Afromexican presence.

Many families in El Coyolillo are extended with patrilineal ties appearing the most important. “The custom of the male children, after they marry, is to live in the house of the parents” because “more strong male arms are needed to do the hard work in the fields” (1994: 549-551). Most Coyoleños, like their ancestors, are sugar cane-cutters. Martínez Marranto points out that because of the inhospitality of most of their own land for farming, Coyoleños must “for the better part of the year, find work in the nearby sugar cane fields” (1991, 7). He adds that for this, they are known as “the best agricultural workers” in the region and that “the quality of their work is attributed many times to ‘the race’ or to ‘the black blood’ than runs through their veins” (1991: 7). Despite the racism of this idea, Martínez Maranto notes that Coyoleños take “pride in their physical qualities and the work they perform” (1991:7). Yet, “at the same time, they reject some of their own physical characteristics, owing to the presence of racial prejudice of colonial origin, prejudices that some of the neighboring communities continue to preserve” (1991:7).

Martínez Maranto writes that “the words ‘indio’ and ‘negro’ are still used by many people in Mexico in a perjorative sense” (1994: 556). Consequently, few Coyoleños identify as “black.” Coyolillo uses its own racial nomenclature which Martínez Maranto describes: “a) morenos y negros; b) morenos y blancos; c) cubanos, morenos, y claros; d) morenos y morenos claros y güeros; e) prietos, trigueños y güeros” (1994: 557). Like many Mexicans, Coyoleños have internalized European standards of beauty which dictate that “the lighter the better” but in spite of this, some Coyoleños say: “we are not ashamed of our origin” (1994: 558). The diminutive, a sign of affection, is used when referring to a darker person: For example, a Coyoleño would not call someone a “prieto” but “prietito” is acceptable” or, alternately, “negrito” instead of “negro.” (1994: 559).

Today, as in many Mexican communities, there is a shortage of young men. This shortage is a result of the massive emigration to the United States. Anthropologists in

other Afromexican communities report similar emigration. Laura Lewis has commented on this scarcity of young men on La Costa Chica, and Sagrario Cruz reports the same from Mata Clara. There are no hard statistics on whether Afromexican emigration to the U.S. is higher than that of the general Mexican population. Sociologist, Annabella Cruz Martínez, is conducting a study of emigration patterns in several rural communities in the state of Veracruz. She reports that in 2002, according to the *Clinica Rural del IMSS*, out of a total population of 1,927, Coyolillo had 812 males and 1115 females. Cruz also reports some ironic statistics obtained from Unidad Medico Rural de Coyolillo. In the year 2000, this agency reported that the sex ratio in the productive age group of 20-24 was 44 men to 130 women. This figure nearly reverses that of the African slave population in the early colonial years when there were an estimated three men for each woman. The overall “masculinity index” (*indice de masculinidad*) for the past decade stands at 72% (2002: interview, documents). El Coyolillo’s overall population has dropped from 2,251 in 1998 to 1,927 in 2002. Most of this decrease is the result of male emigration. So many young men have emigrated to the U.S. that there is a perceptible shortage of them in this rural community. Many of the Coyoleños I spoke to reported on recent sojourns working in North Carolina, Chicago, and Arizona.

Annabella Cruz attributes this emigration primarily to economic factors on Mexico’s rural *ejidos*, or communal farms. At the time of the Revolution, land tenancy was allotted by family. As families grew, a finite amount of land had to be divided among the male heirs, significantly reducing the holdings over the generations. Cruz calls this “a limitation of the agrarian reform in Mexico” (2002: interview). Other factors are the bad quality of some land-holdings and the “*crisis de café*,” caused by overproduction, foreign competition and a wholesale price drop from five pesos to one peso per kilo. When asked if Coyoleños were emigrating to the U.S. because of positive images of blackness there, *vis a vis* Mexico, Cruz felt that black consciousness was not

a factor. Cruz is studying emigration patterns and her choice of El Coyulillo as one of her areas of research had nothing to do with the issue of race. Although she is aware of the interest in El Coyulillo from some Afromexicanistas and North American investigators, race does not play a role in her study (interview).

Despite the phenotypical blackness of many of the inhabitants, race is not a subject that is easily broached with Coyuleños. Alfredo who lived in the community for an extended period was able to gain the trust of many Coyuleños but even he confessed to the need for subtlety in discussing race. The contrast in the consciousness of blackness between Coyulillo and Yanga, less than 100 kilometers distant, is remarkable.

C. Yanga

Yanga lies in a valley in the state of Veracruz, some 80 kilometers southwest of the state capital of Xalapa, close to the cities of Orizaba and Córdoba. This valley location within sight of the Mexico's highest peak, the volcano Pico Orizaba, provides for a hot and humid climate most of the year. Despite its historic reputation, and the efforts of the municipal authorities, Yanga remains a sleepy, rather typical Mexican town which attracts few visitors except during their annual carnival which honors both the town's legendary founder and its patron saint, San Lorenzo. Sugar cane is the principal local crop with irrigation provided by the Rio Seco. Like many Mexican towns, Yanga, because of the lack of employment opportunities, has seen many of its citizens emigrate to the United States in recent years.

Aside from its historic founder, Yanga's most famous sons are Leonardo Ferrandón Ovando, who wrote a memoir of the town in 1963, and Julio de la Fuente, former director of the Instituto Indígena and an educational expert with UNESCO. Yanga is considered a *mestizo* town. Among the current inhabitants, few would discern African phenotypical traits. Yet many residents of Yanga self-identify as Afromexican. One example is a local intellectual, Andrés Martínez Maceda, the town's librarian. Maceda,

who has written a history of the municipality of Yanga (as yet unpublished), spoke to me about the town's current ethnic mix: "There are no indigenous groups here. Here there is a mestizaje of Spanish and black but it is a mix. There is no indigenous population, only mestizo."

Maceda's comment surprised me since the ruins of a Totanac pyramid at Palmillas lies within 20 kilometers of Yanga, and as a historian, he would be in a position to know this. When I asked him if absence of an indigenous population dated from the colonial era, Maceda elaborated his opinion on the ethnic mix of Yanga:

No, it was later. Earlier we were indigenous but then we went through the "refining the race," as we say. It had been improved, well not so much improved, and I don't want to say that the indigenous race is inferior, but the mix between Spanish and black has given us what we are now. We are *mestizos*. Now we are neither indigenous, nor Spanish, nor blacks. We are none of those three definitively.

Despite his denials, Maceda's comments do tend to erase the indigenous presence. Perhaps because of the celebration of Nuestra Tercera Raíz and Yanga's importance to it (though the town's Negritud festival predates that program), people in that town are more willing to identify as Afromexican than indigenous.

Many residents claim black ancestors. Jaime Gordillo Trujillo runs a local miscellany store with his wife, Dolores Flores Talavra, and their two daughters. The brown-skinned Jaime says, "My mother's side is from Yanga blacks but my father's side is from Guanajuato." He adds that, "We feel great pride to be from a community like Yanga and it gives us pleasure that its history is getting well-known internationally." Dolores presents a phenotypical appearance paler and whiter than most North American Anglos. Yet she maintains pride in both her black and white ancestry when she says:

My grandparents were black. My mother was illegitimate but her father had roots in France. We have no contact with that part of the family but the blood is there and it can't be denied.

I asked Dolores how she accounted the general pride in blackness of the people of Yanga compared to the denial of blackness of the people of El Coyolillo.

In Coyolillo they don't have this sentiment because, I believe, they don't know all of the culture and history that is Yanga, and it's a shame because they are descended from something very strong, something very grand, that if they studied it, it would fill them with pride and a positive sentiment.

Dolores's remark highlights the different perceptions between the people of Yanga and those of El Coyolillo. In the case of Yanga, blackness has been validated by historical events and more recently by the Mexican government's acknowledgment of its importance. The program of *Nuestra Tercera Raíz* officially acknowledged the importance of blackness in Mexican culture and the people of Yanga take pride in their historic liberator and his *cimarron* compadres. The history of El Coyolillo does not feature such a liberator and the Afromexicans of that town do not celebrate blackness as an important part of their heritage and they gently resist efforts to impose this consciousness upon them.

Earlier I touched on the incidents leading up to the establishment of the town of San Lorenzo de los Negros in the early 17th century. In the many years from that time until the 20th century, the town does not feature prominently in Mexican history. The movements of peoples and their behavior has not been studied in any detail. From conversations with many residents, I learned that late in the 19th century, severe floods hit the state of Guanajuato to the northwest in the *Bahia* or the central highlands of Mexico. Many families, predominantly white or mestizo, left that area and settled in

Yanga. Nearly all my respondents claim relatives from Guanajuato. According to Pascual Leo Díaz, who served briefly as mayor (1968-70) and who today owns Yanga's only internet cafe:

In general, it was white people from the interior, from Guanajuato or Jalisco or Michoacan. My grandfather was from Guanajuato. The majority of the people here, almost all those who are more or less white, are from Guanajuato.

Padre Toni, Antonio Ameca Rodríguez, pastor of Yanga, confirms this, saying:

We are a mix. There is a little between Afroamericans and mestizos, with the passage of time. People from the center of the republic, from Leon and Guanajuato came. You can find white people that have mixed with Afroamericans.

But it appears that the mixing of racial and ethnic groups began long before this immigration. Writing of the colonial population of Mexico City, Cope states: “[P]oor Spaniards and castas lived cheek by jowl, ate, drank, and socialized in the same taverns, frequented the same marketplaces, and worked in the same shops. Moreover, social intercourse led to sexual intercourse” (1994: 23). It seems likely that a similar process was occurring in smaller towns throughout Mexico as well, including Yanga. However, according to a municipal brochure, as late as 1882, “most of its inhabitants were negroes and they lived in ‘jacales’ made with herbage and palm tree. The few mestizos born here lived around the park in houses made of wood and roof tile.” (Municipal Document). This is difficult to verify and may represent something of a municipal mythology accentuating Yanga's African heritage. Naveda writes of “the massive incorporation of the slaves of Córdoba [and the Afromexicans of nearby Yanga] in the War of Independence [on the side of Hidalgo]” (1993: 95). The events Naveda recounts occurred seventy years before the 1882 date noted by the Yanga municipal document.

The free Afromexicans of Yanga, living a precarious existence virtually in the shadow of the slave center of Córdoba throughout most of the colonial period, could not have been immune to the pressures to join in Hidalgo's call to arms which promised a more egalitarian society. However, after the War of Independence, Yanga again disappears from the annals of the main currents of Mexican history until the Revolution of 1910. Much of the activity in Yanga during this period is derived from hearsay. According to Pascual Leo Díaz:

Here [Yanga] was a sanctuary for revolutionaries from San Juan de la Punta, which is very small town while Yanga was a commercial center. General Tejada later changed the names of towns named for Saints to names of heroes of all the people.

In the 1970s, a church-related group of young people led by Jorge Martínez and Maria de Jesus Morales Martínez, formed the Club Yang Barra and organized the first "Carnaval de Negritud" celebrating the town's historic founder a decade before the proclamation of Nuestra Tercera Raíz. Within a few years, the town decided to combine this festival with that of its patron saint, San Lorenzo. The convergence of these two festivals is not without some justification. According to legend, San Lorenzo (circa 210-258). was born in Spain and appointed by Pope Sixtus II to serve as a deacon in Rome. The emperor Valerian ordered Lorenzo to deliver all the riches of the church to the imperial palace. Lorenzo called up all the poor, diseased, and disabled Christians he could find and brought them to the emperor saying, "These are our treasures." For his insolence, he was put to death. Padre Antonio speaks of San Lorenzo's significance for townspeople saying, "The importance for us in his testimony as a martyr is that he was burned at the stake." This remark emphasizes a typically Mexican appreciation of sacrifice, particularly blood sacrifice. So, according to Christian mythology, San Lorenzo, as a defender of the poor and downtrodden, bears some resemblance to Yanga

the African warrior and liberator. Padre Antonio gives his opinion on the importance of the convergence of the secular and religious personages. “It is something the people can identify on one side with the mix that we have here in Mexico of indigenous, African, Italian, French and Spanish.”

For the past few decades the town of Yanga has engaged in several public relations efforts to attract visitors. In 1982, artist (and doctor) Hermenegildo González Fernández, designed the town’s escutcheon which features an African man standing in the hands of God, breaking the chains of slavery as a white dove flies overhead. The powerful image is backgrounded by the Mexican national colors, red, green, and white. González designed the image to “represent globally the foundation of the first free town of America, in January 1609, and to honor Yanga, the precursor of all the liberators of the continent.” I asked González how the idea of a town seal arose in the first place. He told me,

I don’t conceive of Yanga [the man], as some do, as a highwayman or bandit. I don’t have this idea of Yanga but see him as a hero, as a liberator, and from there developed the idea that each hero or liberator should have a flag, so let’s make a flag to Yanga.

The municipality of Yanga uses a variety of slogans to advertise the town. In addition to “the first free town in the Americas” (*el primer pueblo libre de América*), Yanga also boosts its image with, “our history makes us great” (*nuestra historia nos hace grande*), and “Yanga, Live the Change!” (*Yanga. Vive el Cambio!*), although this latter seems more of a political slogan adopted by the newly victorious Partido Acción Nacional (PAN). A recent former mayor, Eduardo Gordillo Guzman, was able to attract African diplomats from the Ivory Coast to the town’s fiesta some years back, which added an element of authenticity to the carnival. More recently Charles Rowell, editor of the black arts journal, *Callaloo*, who is preparing a special issue on Afromexico,

visited Yanga. But despite the town's attempts to boost itself as a place to visit, few tourists actually go there, and fewer still stay for any length of time. There are only two hotels in the entire town, each with less than a dozen rooms and neither with air-conditioning (which many North Americans would consider a necessity in a town as hot and humid as Yanga). One of the hotels is so substandard that only the truly poor or desperate would consider staying there. But Yanga does attract thousands of tourists, most of them day-visitors from nearby cities and towns, to its annual "Festival de Carnaval."

The 2002 festival took place between August 2 and August 11. Day one features one of the most important events, *La Quema del Calimbo*, which means "the burning of the branding iron." The purpose of this ceremony is to demonstrate contempt and defiance toward the hated symbol of slavery and to celebrate freedom. *La Quema del Calimbo* takes place close to midnight on the small main square (*zocalo*) of Yanga, just down the block from the Church of San Lorenzo. It features a suspenseful pyrotechnic display and culminates when the symbolic branding iron is set alight and sent aloft into the evening sky. To a visitor, it seems perfectly appropriate to symbolically destroy one of the most odious instruments of the slave era. However, it was with some surprise that I learned that this is a new feature inaugurated in 2002, replacing an older one that had been performed for decades. A few days before the festival, I spoke with town librarian, Andres Maceda. He told me that the carnival begins with, "The burning of bad humor, (*la quema del mal humor*)." He told me that the burning of the branding iron was a new idea. So I asked him what they burned in past years and was shocked to hear him reply: "Until last year, an effigy of a black man was burned but this year we have already changed that. We will no longer burn the black man but we will burn a branding iron."

I could scarcely believe what I was hearing. Here, at a festival celebrating blackness, they launch the proceedings by burning a black man in effigy. I pressed

Andres on this asking again, “*What did you burn before?*” He answered, more calmly than I had asked. “It was a stature of a black man...not a statue but an effigy. Like a piñata, but black.” (*Era la estatua de un negro, osea no una estatua sino una esfinge. Como una piñata, pero negra.*) Finally Andres seemed to sense my disbelief and clarified how this came about.

We are changing to the *calimba*. We weren’t thinking of this until a guy named Carlos Gómez read a report and said, “Hey, why not, instead of burning a black man, when we are supposed to be celebrating him, why not burn the *calimba*?” That was the fire that they marked the slaves with and the object most hated by the blacks. The idea was accepted very well by the mayor and others. And to me it seems much better. It is something logical—not to burn a black man if it is a festival of blackness, but to burn the hated branding iron instead, the hated instrument that used to brand the men on the face and arms and the women on the breasts. It was something terrible for them.

The idea of burning a black man in effigy, even if he is seen simply as a symbol of “bad humor,” still seems shocking and offensive to a North American. But this is, no doubt, in part because we come from a country with a history of prolific lynchings in the not-too-distant past and we bring our own understandable emotional responses when confronted by a custom that would be clearly painful and in extremely poor taste if performed in the United States. However, Mexico has no history of lynchings or apartheid or any of the more onerous forms of racial oppression. Despite their less than sanguine history of race relations, they never resorted to anything like that kind of terror to impose racial purity. And if the present population of Yanga was more phenotypically black and had a historical memory of oppression and slavery, it is doubtful whether they would have burned a black man in effigy. In any case, the town of Yanga belatedly

realized that their *quema del mal humor* in the form of an effigy of a black man, was inappropriate and have now substituted *la quema de la calimba*. In addition, as if to demonstrate their good faith as well as to educate the public, during the festival, one of the municipal buildings displayed a powerful and moving exhibit of authentic branding irons from the slave era.

The last time I saw Andres Maceda he was having his hair braided, African-style, by a Garifuna woman from Honduras who had come to Yanga to celebrate the carnival. As we have seen, the townspeople of Yanga demonstrate a good deal of pride in their town's legendary founder. The word *liberadora* is heard consistently in reference to him. He is seen as the precursor to all the historic liberators of the Americas. A poem, given to me by former mayor, Eduardo Gordillo Guzman, illustrates some of the local sentiment. A few excerpts follow:

*Yanga con grade fervor
amó la libertad,
desafiando con valor
al Gobierno Virreynal
Con detreza y rectitud
cual gladiator en la arena
logró romper las cadenas
de la odiosa esclavitud.
¡Libertad!...Yanga gritaba
libertad es lo que quiero
y ese grito llegaba
al corazón de los negros.
Y en pláticas sabrosas*

*contaban los abuelos
las proeza portentosas
efectuadas por los negros*

The town of Yanga is also featured in a novel, by Guillermo Sánchez de Anda, published in 1998. In *Yanga: un guerrero negro*, the author has taken historical facts and fashioned a brief novel celebrating the spirit of the town's legendary liberator (*liberadora*). *Yanga: un guerrero negro* opens with another historical incident, this one from 1995. The indigenous Zapatista (EZLN) rebellion, led by the mercurial Subcomandante Marcos, had just erupted in Chiapas. Several partisans of the cause had rented a house in distant Yanga and were betrayed to the authorities who raided the house and seized a small cache of arms. The federal authorities overplayed the incident, turning it a public relations vehicle, seeking to portray themselves as winning the war against "terrorism." Sánchez de Anda seizes upon this incident to bring the story of Yanga and his followers full circle and relate it to the continuing struggle for liberation in Mexico. For Yanga and Marcos, despite the centuries that separate them and their diffuse causes, are both, to be sure, liberators, although Sánchez de Anda emphasizes that Marcos is more of "a symbol [...] more famous abroad than in Mexico" (1998: 126-127) while Yanga represents the genuine article.

The novel's hero, Silverio Aranda, is a journalist sent to cover the government seizure of the Zapatistas in Yanga. Previously ignorant of the town's illustrious history he meets the equivalent of a local *griot*, Don Tiburcio Lagunes, who undertakes to initiate the reporter into the nuances and importance of the history of Yanga. Don Tiburcio tells Silverio that the detention of the Zapatistas was almost a historical necessity. The emphasis on the role of *liberadora* resounds throughout the text. Silverio ponders the history of Africans in Mexico: "Who and how many were they? Where did they come from? And what was

their condition and their influence or participation in the process of mestizaje?” (1998: 62).

As discussed above, some North American and European scholars try to visualize the history of Africans in Mexico as emblematic of the African diaspora in general in the same way they might view other Latin American nations with a large and distinct black population. This view fails to take into account the realities of Mexico. As Don Tiburcio states it in the novel: “The mestizaje between white men and black women, indigenous men and black women, black men and indigenous women, proliferated and this is how the purity of the black race was lost” (1998: 73). These comments express the reality of Mexican miscegenation and are true for the country in general (except on La Costa Chica). While some academic opinion may not agree with the points Sánchez de Anda makes in this brief novel, he represents much current Mexican thinking on the African contributions to Mexican culture. In this view, the impulse to acknowledge and proclaim mestizaje was a positive historical development. Unfortunately, racist thinking on the part of some of the “founding fathers” of the doctrine has prevented the idea from being carried to its logical conclusions perhaps until recently. The African diaspora in Mexico does not follow the pattern of other nations, even those of other Latin American countries such as Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela. Sánchez de Anda, in his novel, along with the best of current Mexican scholarship, seeks to redress the previous racist imbalance by crediting and celebrating the African foundations of Mexican culture and nationality. Mexican scholars now recognize the shortcomings of “official” mestizaje. But unlike some some European and North American scholars most of them do not wish to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

V. Conclusion

The work of Mexican anthropologists and historians to reclaim the nation's African identity is a welcome effort. Mexico has a proud tradition of historical and anthropological scholarship. In the past, most of this effort was devoted to *indigenismo*, the celebration of Mexico's Indian past. *Indigenismo* became a feature of 19th century Mexico even during the long dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz. But, as Alan Knight points out, "Porfirian *indigenismo* was more rhetorical than real: its material manifestations were statues of Cuauhtémoc in Mexico City rather than Indian schools in the countryside" (79). Ted Vincent notes that "[t]he scholar Guillermo Bonfil Batalla pointed out in the late 1980s that since the time of Guerrero, there has been much radical play-acting at being 'Indian,' while actual Indian culture and life-style is ignored" (*Konch*). In reality, the racial politics of the Porfiriata stressed blanquemento or whitening and were in line with similar policies in Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America which encouraged European immigration to "improve the race." The Mexican Revolution represented a mass movement to put true *indigenismo* into practice. This endeavor grew out of the promises implicit in the Mexican Revolution, especially the branch represented by Emiliano Zapata. But the proclamations by Jose Vasconcelos and other theorists of *mestizaje*, such as Manuel Gamio, reasserted the European bias in their celebration of Mexico's "cosmic race." As Martínez Maranto asserts, "The great inequalities that the Revolution tried to mitigate in 1910, persisted in the Mexican social formation"(1). While statues of Cuauhtémoc and Cuitluhuac adorn many Mexican cities and Cuauhtémoc's image appears on the 100-peso note, Alan Knight points out that, "Indians themselves were the objects, not the authors, of *indigenismo*" (71). There was always, as there remains, strong elements of paternalism, objectivization and appropriation in the Mexican attitude toward its indigenous past. In *La Región de las Quimeras*, Gómez Izquierdo calls *mestizaje* as it was developed by Mexican

intellectuals, “the discourse of the elites who identify profoundly with the Euro-American paradigm of progress, nationalism and modernity” (15). In this view, Vasconcelos, despite his pronounced anti-U.S. bias, was unable to escape a Eurocentric hegemony. Gómez Izquierdo points to the attitude of many of the elite who feel, “Well, if we are a mestizo country, we cannot, even if we wanted to, be racists” (24). Gómez Izquierdo sees this as a fallacy.

One of Gómez Izquierdo’s chapters is entitled, “¡Pásale, güerita, pásale!” (2001: 21-26) which means “Go ahead” or “Come in, white girl.” (This loses much in the translation as the diminutive “ita” is a sign of endearment and good will.) This phrase is used by many in the service sector, such as shopkeepers and restaurant hosts, who wish to flatter their female clients by attributing to them a European standard of beauty. A very dark-skinned mestiza woman told me that the phrase had been addressed to her several times in an effort at flattery. Gómez Izquierdo suggests that this is ingrained in Mexican thinking because of a Eurocentric bias. I recall in the 1970s when the Mexican light beer, Superior, was advertised as “la rubia,” or “the blonde beer,” and featured a beautiful, light-haired, Anglo-looking woman in a bathing suit on its billboards. This, according to Gómez Izquierdo, is one of the ways that mestizaje enacts itself among the elite in Mexico. Another example of elitist insensitivity was glaringly revealed in 2002 on the occasion of the Papal visit to canonize Juan Diego, the Indian to whom the Virgin of Guadalupe is said to have appeared in the 16th century. Every written account of Juan Diego, of whom little is known with any certainty, states that he was an Indian. Yet the official portrait of him distributed during the visit of John Paul II portrayed a man who looks for all the world like a European friar. Anyone familiar with Mexico knows with how much esteem most of the population (including nonbelievers) hold the Virgin of Guadalupe and the humble Indian to whom she appeared. Other pictures of Juan Diego, on everything from holy cards to statues to commemorative candles to T-shirts, have

traditionally depicted him as very dark-skinned. The official portrait could have passed for Francis of Assisi or a medieval English monk. This representation created a strong controversy in Mexico with many complaints about this portrait, which may suggest that the Eurocentric bias suggested by Gómez Izquierdo and others is perhaps wearing a bit thin. I regret that I neglected to ask the Afromexicans to whom I spoke, how they felt about the Juan Diego controversy.

I suggested earlier that part of the reason for the growth of Afromexican studies is a feeling of “fatigue” over the question of indigenismo. Sagrario Cruz Carretaro agrees with this when she says, “ I didn’t want to continue to research indigenous people. There were enough anthropologists covering that topic.”(interview). It is felt that indigenismo has become the intellectual property of the policy makers and that Afromexican studies offers both an alternative to this dominant discourse and a genuine opportunity for discovery. Gómez Izquierdo is just one of the current critics of traditional indigenismo. Simultaneously with the growth of Afromexican research, scholars such as Martínez Maranto and Gómez Izquierdo are questioning the very foundations of indigenismo, intellectual work that could be of service to both Afro- and indigenous Mexicans.

In the meantime, there is a continuing effort on the part of some of Mexico’s historians and anthropologists to reevaluate the African contributions to Mexican culture and to profile the lives of Afromexicans today. Part of this project is political. As Sagrario Cruz says, “The Africans from Mexico are not really aware of their African heritage. It’s difficult to get this group of people to acquire consciousness. If they are conscious of their blackness, it is not in a positive way. That’s why I talk about racism”(interview). Some commentators maintain that racism exists in general attitudes and in the Mexican media. Says Yekk Musik, who has lived in Xalapa for nine years:

Even today there are shows in blackface in Mexico. Now what does that say to someone like me? In 2002, Mexico still has blackface on national television. And not only do they have it but they show us in the most barbaric way. *Amos and Andy* can't come close. (interview).

Musik is less than enthusiastic about the efforts of Afromexicanistas to recover black contributions to Mexican history. "In 2002? Fifty years behind everyone else!" he says, referring to African American efforts in the 20th Century. He adds, "Some of these writers (Afromexicanistas) may be privileged themselves and not recognize it" (2002: interview).

I have referred to the budding black consciousness movement among Afromexicans on La Costa Chica where their presence is more obvious and concentrated. In Veracruz, they are more dispersed and Afromexicans have thus far proved resistant to claiming a black consciousness which suggests parallels with parts of Brazil. However, Mexico, despite its huge indigenous and smaller Afromexican minorities, is arguably a much more racially mixed nation than Brazil. While lighter-skinned Mexicans generally have more power than their browner neighbors, and tend to favor European ideals of beauty and efficiency, mestizaje in the form of miscegenation in Mexico is the predominant biological fact. Eurocentric interpretations of this reality, inherited from the founders of official Mestizaje, are undergoing revision, thanks in large part to today's Afromexicanistas.

In spite of the mainly positive comments I have made throughout this essay on the work of the Afromexicanistas, I would like to revisit the question raised earlier of whether the concept of mestizaje as a discourse of national identity has become fossilized or frozen in the imperfect state in which it was imagined and enacted throughout most of the 20th century. The efforts of the Afromexicanistas suggest that it has not. But their efforts to rediscover and reinterpret Afromexican history must be

combined with a renewed engagement with the realities of the failure of traditional mestizaje *vis a vis* the large and increasingly self-conscious indigenous populations who are becoming ever more aware of their exclusion from the national ideology. In addition, Afromexicans themselves must be brought into the dialogue to ensure that what is presented is not simply a scholarly exercise but has real relevance to the lives of the people it attempts to celebrate. The failure to do so could lead to a duplication of the Othering of Afromexican and indigenous peoples long practiced by traditional mestizaje whereby these peoples are celebrated as historical relics yet ignored in contemporary reality. In addition, engaged scholars should seek ways of facilitating a dialogue between the indigenous and Afromexican communities. Reports from La Costa Chica suggest that much remains to be done to enable cooperation between these two groups. Another positive development might be an effort, spearheaded by the Afromexicanistas themselves, to secure scholarships at the Universidad Veracruzana for young people from Coyolillo and other Afromexican communities. I am certain that it is only because of their enduring poverty and the general difficulty of their daily existence, that few Coyoleños seem to seek higher education. Such efforts would be essentially reformist in nature but could still make important contributions to improving Mexican society in general, and especially that segment of it that is the focus of study of the Afromexicanistas. By becoming more activist, the Afromexicanistas would demonstrate that they are not simply engaging in a scholarship for its own sake but that the valuable work they are doing is relevant to the lives of the people they study.

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