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Black Mexico: Race and Society from Colonial to Modern Times

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H-NET BOOK REVIEW

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Ben Vinson, Matthew Restall, eds. *Black Mexico: Race and Society from Colonial to Modern Times*. Albuquerque University of New Mexico Press, 2009. 278 pp., \$27.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8263-4701-5.

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The Direction of Afro-Mexican Studies

In the midst of fierce debates about the constructions of racial difference on both sides of the Rio Grande, and questions about how to undertake the study of race in Latin America given the complexity of the issue, Ben Vinson III and Matthew Restall take a stance that black Mexicans are a historically identifiable population with a traceable history. The book's title, *Black Mexico: Race and Society from Colonial to Modern Times*, makes that political statement. The book itself presents a wide range of essays to make this case from the beginnings of Mexican slavery to the twenty-first century and poses powerful questions about historical and contemporary constructions of racial difference, classification, and political life in Mexico. The essays' collective scope is impressive, using historical, anthropological, and contemporary lenses, to encompass ideas of freedom and agency under slavery, *mestizaje* (the process of ethnic and cultural mixture between indigenous peoples, Africans, and Europeans), and present-day movements for political autonomy. The result is a long-overdue accessible introduction to the history, culture, and political life of Mexico's black population that does an excellent job of acknowledging, and attempting to fill, gaps in recent scholarship on Afro-Mexican history and society.

The editors' introduction notes the book's dominant theme as the integration of blacks into Mexican society. Necessarily, this poses the question of how a black Mexican is defined. Rather than being seen as a hindrance, that question is tackled from multiple angles. Section 1, "Entering the Colonial World," stresses the importance of being able to detect Afro-Mexicans in historical records as a distinct group and engages ideas of Afro-Mexican social integration through considerations of slavery, freedom, social agency, and racial identity and hierarchy in colonial Mexico. Section 2, "Engaging Modernity," surveys contemporary manifestations of identity discussed from the viewpoint of Afro-Mexicans, black Mexican political activists, and researchers from the United States.

"Entering the Colonial World" is dominated by studies of changing conceptions of freedom, agency, and social integration. It begins with Frank "Trey" Proctor III's insistence that universal ideals of liberty were not always the motivation behind slave rebellions in Mexico, that they were frequently motivated only by concerns for fair treatment. This opens up an important theoretical space for other essays that think through the very complex relationship between individual freedom and the maintenance of the larger social hierarchy. Andrew B. Fisher's essay moves down this road by examining the relations between blacks and indigenous groups in Guerrero, providing a case study for the unstable position occupied by Afro-Mexicans between Spanish colonists and the massive indigenous population in New Spain. Pat Carroll takes this a step further, citing the many ways in which blacks were able to fully integrate themselves into predominantly indigenous areas through displays of cultural practice, something that could never occur in Spanish and creole areas. He shows Afro-Mexicans then using these negotiations to play Spanish and creole (or indigenous and Spanish/creole) social systems against each other for their own benefit. Vinson continues historical considerations of Afro-Mexican agency through his study of free black Mexican labor, noting the ways in which blacks became integrated into the free labor sector by the late 1700s. Shifting from discussions of labor and intergroup negotiations to self-determination, Nicole von Germeten then presents convincing research to argue that otherwise degrading race labels were actually skillfully negotiated by blacks in New Spain, and frequently used to their own advantage inside the social hierarchy. Finally, a co-authored chapter by Joan Bristol and Matthew Restall presents an intriguing history of Afro-Mexican and Afro-Yucatan love-magic potions, developing ideas first articulated in Bristol's *Christians, Blasphemers, and Witches: Afro-Mexican Ritual Practice in the Seventeenth Century* (2007). Their argument that ritualists of African descent were valued and consulted ahead of indigenous practitioners works in tandem with much new research articulating the ways in which ritual

and magical practice could actually produce very powerful and quite real forms of social agency for those with such specialized knowledge, particularly regarding its use by slaves or servants to render their own masters kind or more pliable. What emerges from this section is one of the best overviews yet written of the many ways to conceive of freedom and social agency for black Mexicans: relations with indigenous communities; cultural practices; ritual and magic; adaptation and re-formation of racial names; and the politics of labor. The essays are a fascinating, cohesive, and yet refreshingly diverse set of case studies that address freedom and agency on both historically specific and theoretical levels.

Section 2, "Engaging Modernity," presents a series of theses on Afro-Mexican self-identity, from stern warnings regarding the dangers if Afro-Mexicans are not recognized as a distinct ethnic group to questioning the very existence of such a group in modern Mexico. In their introduction, the editors note that studies of black contributions to Mexican society largely position Afro-Mexican culture as "relegated to the colonial era or the early national period" (p. 2). Unfortunately, *Black Mexico* falls into this same trap. For example, section 1 is considerably longer and more wide-ranging than section 2. At minimum, this discrepancy makes apparent the desperate need for more research on contemporary Afro-Mexican political and social consciousness. Fortunately, the few essays here provide a solid start for considerations of social identity, and the research practices used to engage them.

Laura A. Lewis begins with one of the best accounts of fieldwork in Afro-Mexico yet published, fully elucidating the complexities of studying a group whose concern lies more with social class than racial identity, particularly one whose consciousness lies across two nations with very different conceptions of race, Mexico and the United States. Her essay leads the reader to begin thinking through the ways in which the category Afro-Mexican can be considered a reaction to strict-constructionist racial definitions in the United States. Bobby Vaughn takes up this point in his personal narrative reflecting on his time living in Mexico. Vaughn argues that residents of the Costa Chica -- the predominantly Afro-Mexican region along the coast of Oaxaca and Guerrero -- should be allowed to engage with questions of identity and blackness on their own terms. Alva Moore Stevenson tackles the same questions through the story of her own family. While from our vantage point her genealogy prevents any easy classification along national, ethnic, or linguistic lines, she is insistent on two points: first, that she is an Afro-Mexican, and second, that the contributions of Afro-Mexicans to the national histories of Mexico and the United States are quite significant, if often ignored. An insistence on the need to recognize Afro-Mexican

identity is brought to its full force by Jean-Philbert Mobwa Mobwa N'Djoli in the book's final essay. He specifically enumerates the ways Afro-Mexicans suffer from their lack of recognition by the Mexican government, and presents a series of demands to overcome this barrier. This is a pointed contrast to the more nuanced approaches of the previous three essays, particularly since *Black Mexico* ends on this forceful political note. It might have been more appropriate to reverse the order of the essays, moving from strict definitions of racial consciousness to the problems therein presented by Stevenson, Vaughn, and Lewis.

Yet perhaps it is only with such a forceful conclusion that we can accurately reflect on the hundreds of years of complex and multifaceted history surveyed in the previous section. It is clear that more work needs to be done in contemporary identity studies, and though we find it difficult to believe the editors could not have found more essays to include in section 2, this is a minor point in an otherwise overdue and welcome volume. *Black Mexico*, addressing every major issue and relevant perspective in Afro-Mexican studies, should emerge as the major introductory text in the field.

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