

THE ERASURE OF THE AFRO ELEMENT OF *MESTIZAJE* IN MODERN
MEXICO:
THE CODING OF VISIBLY BLACK MESTIZOS ACCORDING TO A WHITE
AESTHETIC IN AND THROUGH THE DISCOURSE ON NATION DURING THE
CULTURAL PHASE OF THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION, 1920-1968

by
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The University of British Columbia
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Abstract

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THE CODING OF VISIBLY BLACK MESTIZOS ACCORDING TO A WHITE AESTHETIC IN AND THROUGH THE DISCOURSE ON NATION DURING THE CULTURAL PHASE OF THE MEXICAN REVOLUTION, 1920-1968

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Abstract

"The Erasure of the Essential Afro Element of *Mestizaje* in Modern Mexico: The Coding of Visibly Black Mestizos According to a White Aesthetic In and Through the Discourse on Nation During the Cultural Phase of the Mexican Revolution, 1920-1968" examines how the Afro elements of Mexican *mestizaje* were erased from the ideal image of the Mexican mestizo and how the Afro ethnic contributions were plagiarized in modern Mexico. It explores part of the discourse on nation in the narrative produced by authors who subscribed to the belief that only white was beautiful, between 1920 and 1968, during a period herein identified as the "cultural phase of the Mexican Revolution." It looks at the coding and distortion of the image of visibly black Mexicans in and through literature and film, and unveils how the Afro element "disappeared" from some of the most popular images, tastes in music, dance, song, food, and speech forms

viewed as cultural texts that, by way of official intervention, were made “badges” of Mexican national identity.

The premise of this study is that the *criollo* elite and their allies, through government, disenfranchised Mexicans as a whole by institutionalizing a magic mirror—materialized in the narrative of nation—where mestizos can “see” only a partial reflection of themselves. The black African characteristics of Mexican *mestizaje* were totally removed from the ideal image of “Mexican-ness”¹ disseminated in and out of the country. During this period, and in the material selected for study, wherever Afro-Mexicans—visibly Afro or not—are mentioned, they appear as “mestizos” oblivious of their African heritage and willingly moving toward becoming white.

The analysis adopts as critical foundation two essays: “Black Phobia and the White Aesthetic in Spanish American Literature,” by Richard L. Jackson; and “Mass Visual Productions,” by James Snead. In “Black Phobia...” Jackson explains that, to define “superior and inferior as well as the concept of beauty” according to how white a person is perceived to be, is a “tradition dramatized in Hispanic Literature from Lope de Rueda’s *Eufemia* (1576) to the present” (467). For Snead, “the coding of blacks in film, as in the wider society, involves a history of images and signs associating black skin color with servile behavior and marginal status” (142).

¹Anita González-El Hilalí uses this term to designate what is Mexican. Hereby, the term is adopted (González-El 125).

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Preface

Chapter One of this work by Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas was published in essence with the permission of the Supervisory Committee in the *Publication of the Afro Latin American Association (PALARA)* from the University of Missouri in Columbia, Missouri under the title: "The 'Afro-Mexican' and the Revolution: Making Afro-Mexicans Invisible Through the Ideology of *Mestizaje* in *La raza cósmica*." *PALARA* 4 (2000): 59-83. Also, with the permission of the Committee Chapter Four, "*Angelitos negros*: a Film from the 'Golden Epoch' of Mexican Cinema: The Coding of Visibly Black Mexicans In and Through a Far-Reaching Medium" appeared in *PALARA* 5 (2001): 49-62.

Acknowledgments

One day in the early eighties I ran by pure chance into a book that caught my attention while I was searching the library shelves at Portland State University. It was a book with a gray vinyl cover stamped with black letters that read: ***The Black Image in Latin American Literature*** by Richard L. Jackson. The title itself had a life-changing message for me. I took the book home and read it. There were many things that were totally beyond me, but those that were within my reach impressed me for their simplicity in conveying one of the greatest truths humanity is yet to pay full attention to, namely that while racism is outdated, it is still being taught and practiced unchecked in the least expected places by the least expected people, at times unknowingly.

Dr. Jackson's work allowed me to think about myself in a different way. It enabled me to realize that the Afro hair I combed so carefully in Mexico City while I was a teen-ager made me a "*chino*" (in Argentina, Peru, and Mexico) or "*cuculuste*" (the Aztec word for curly hair). Therefore, and for his further guidance and support in the making of this work I will always be indebted to Dr. Jackson. Also, I would like to take the opportunity to thank Dr. Gloria Nne Onyeoziri, Dr. Antonio Urrello, Dr. Robert Miller, Dr. Earl Rees, and Dr. Kofi Agorsah for their invaluable guidance, help, and support throughout this study. Finally, I want to thank my family for their patience with me throughout the course of this work.

To my great-grandmother Nicolasa
whose photograph may have illuminated
me sooner if someone had shown it to me

Introduction

For Edward Said, nations are narrations and the power of narrating and blocking the formation and emergence of other narratives "is very important for culture and imperialism, and it constitutes one of the most important connections among them" (Introduction, xiii).

According to Jose Piedra, Nebrija argued in 1492 "that language becomes the source of power when it provides an official 'home' for the memory of all who contribute to the empire, and grammarians act as the official guardians of such a home" (306).

Mestizos, or people of mixed blood constitute the largest percentage of the total population in Mexico.¹ It is generally reported that mestizos represent anywhere from 55 to 85 percent of Mexican people. The common belief, even at present, is that this group or "minority" is the result of the exclusive mix of Amerindians and Spaniards. This partial truth was disseminated in Mexico, and outside the country, during a period herein identified as "the cultural phase of the Mexican Revolution (1920-1968)."

Today's Mexican mestizos, known throughout the colonial period (1521-1821) as *mezclas* or *castas*, began to be born shortly after the Spanish invasion in 1521. Yet to be acknowledged is the fact that these *mezclas* were the daughters and sons of an array of mixes that occurred among the vanquished Amerindians, the enslaved black Africans, the invading Spaniards, and other people, such as Asians.

¹ According to the official 2000 preliminary report from the XII census in Mexico the general population is 97,361,711(INEGI).

The origin of the semantic problem may be explained further by the fact that during the colonial period the classification "mestizo" referred only to the offspring of Spaniard and Amerindian. However, it must be stressed that this was merely one classification among over a dozen and a half "racial" classifications of which the majority, at times obviously and at times imperceptibly, contained the black African element.

In 1946, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán added another dimension to the problem when he "rediscovered" a visibly black population in Mexico's south Pacific Coast. He classified mestizos as Indo-mestizos, Euro-mestizos and Afro-mestizos based on appearance. As a result, the term "Afro-Mexican" seems to have become a synonym for the visibly black portion of Mexican mestizos in a growing body of academic work. The problem with this perception is that it creates an artificial division of Mexican mestizos based only on the way people look. For instance, the black or Afro root of Mexican *mestizaje* has been referred to as the "Third Root." This, in the case of visibly black Mexicans, would appear erroneous. In some instances it seems more appropriate to call the Afro element the first root, in others the second, or the third, or fourth. It should be clear, particularly in the light of new readings of history,² that a considerable part of Mexican mestizos, even many whose appearance would have us believing otherwise, carry a black African element in their genetic make-up.

² In *Historia General de México: versión 2000* it is mentioned that to understand the confusion in terms, one must take into consideration the tendency to hide the origins of mixed blood since it was considered infamous (320, 321).

The majority of Mexican mestizos are the daughters and sons of the hundreds of thousands of black African slaves³ that began arriving in Mexico shortly after Hernán Cortés. On the one hand, this understanding is crucial to dispel the myth that Mexican mestizos are the offspring exclusively of Amerindians and Spaniards. On the other hand, it is important as it helps clarify that when visibly black Mexicans are referred to, it is not a reference to a separate group: it is a reference to a portion of Mexican Afro-mestizos that due to their looks alone were singled out by the racist *criollo* thought that controlled the discourse on nation during the cultural phase of the Revolution.

This work analyzes the coding and distortion of the image of visibly black Mexicans in and through literature, film, and their omission in popular culture images that, by way of official intervention, were made badges, cards, stamps, or impressions of national identity. It explores how the Afro elements of Mexican *mestizaje* were erased from the collective memory and the Afro ethnic contributions plagiarized in modern Mexico. This study examines part of the discourse on nation expressed in various cultural texts produced by authors who subscribed to the belief that only white was beautiful, between 1920 and 1968.

The premise of this study is that the *criollo* elite and their allies, through government, disenfranchised Mexicans as a whole by institutionalizing a magic mirror—materialized in the narrative of nation—where mestizos can “see” only a partial reflection of themselves. The black African characteristics of Mexican

³ It should be mentioned that many Spaniards carried black genes as documented in Chapter Two; and that some blacks landed with the Spaniards before the onset of the Transatlantic Slave Trade as well.

mestizaje were totally removed from the ideal image of Mexican-ness disseminated in and out of the country. During this period, and in the material selected for study, wherever Afro-Mexicans—visibly Afro or not—are mentioned, they appear as “mestizos” oblivious of their African heritage and willingly moving toward becoming white.

The critical foundation of this work rests mainly in two essays: “Black Phobia and the White Aesthetic in Spanish American Literature” by Richard L. Jackson; and “Mass Visual Productions” in *White Screens Black Images: The Dark Side of Hollywood*, by James Snead.

In “Black Phobia...” Jackson points out that defining “superior and inferior as well as the concept of beauty,” according to how white a person is perceived to be is a “tradition dramatized in Hispanic literature from Lope de Rueda’s *Eufemia* (1576) to the present” (467). Under the white aesthetic explained by Jackson, morality, civility, gallantry, bravery, prowess, industriousness, restraint, sincerity, intellectuality, good-heartedness, and love-for-life among other virtues are measured according to how white a person appears to be; in short, virtuosity is defined by whiteness.

For Snead, “the coding of blacks in film, as in the wider society, involves a history of images and signs associating black skin color with servile behavior and marginal status.” Snead points out, “while these depictions may have reflected prior economic oppression of blacks, they also tend to perpetuate it.” He clarifies saying that, “through the exact repetition which is film’s main virtue, these associations became part of film’s typological vocabulary...” (142). James

Snead's perspective on "coding" adds another dimension to Jackson's readings under the "white aesthetic."

The coding identified by Snead uses three particular tactics, among others, to forge and perpetuate black stereotypes: "mythification," "marking," and "omission" (143). The tactic of mythifying whites as "powerful" and "civilized" ensures that blacks appear as meek and uncivilized. Marking, as applying paint to make blackness stand out, is done to highlight the color line. The omission of prominent black figures reproduces and perpetuates the myth that blacks are subservient. For Snead "codes are not singular portrayals of one thing or another, but larger, complex relationships" (142).

The following cultural texts will be the focus of this work: the book-length essay *La raza cósmica: misión de la raza iberoamericana* (*The Cosmic Race: Mission of the Iberian-American Race*)⁴ (1925) by José Vasconcelos; a sample of ideal Mexican mestizo images that, once detached from their Afro component, were implanted in the collective memory and psyche through various means of mass persuasion; the picaresque novel *La vida inútil de Pito Pérez* (*The Futile Life of Pito Perez*)⁵ (1938) by José Rubén Romero; the film *Angelitos Negros* (*Little Black Angels*) (1948) by Joselito Rodríguez; and the postmodern novel *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (*The Death of Artemio Cruz*) (1962) by Carlos Fuentes.

⁴ All translations from English to Spanish/Spanish-English in this work are mine unless otherwise specified.

⁵ This title was translated by William O. Cord. See bibliography for full citation.

The texts mentioned above are examined to disclose how visibly black Mexicans are coded in accordance with a white aesthetic.⁶ The corpus studied is confined to the cultural phase of the Mexican Revolution, 1920 to 1968.

However, this study refers to other historical periods as deemed necessary to provide support and a context to analyze the contents of the works from a perspective herein called the Afro-Hispanic American approach, a critical view that reads texts concerning the black experience from a black perspective.

Chapter One, "Biological *Mestizaje*: The Afro-Mexican and the Revolution: Making Afro-Mexicans Invisible Through the Ideology of *Mestizaje* in *La raza cósmica*" reveals the racist agenda forming the core of José Vasconcelos' "cosmic race" ideology. It exposes how as soon as Vasconcelos was named Minister of Education in 1921 his perspective, that promoted whitening for all, began to be disseminated via major channels of mass persuasion such as public education, newspapers, radio, mural paintings, cinema, impressions of popular nationalism, and literature, among other media. This chapter uncovers how the African elements of Mexican *mestizaje* were systematically excluded by integration. It exposes how at the time, under a perspective marked by black phobia and white aesthetics, it was argued that all non-whites were on their way to becoming some new shade of "white" due to natural selection and love.

The second Chapter, "The Forgotten Black African Root of Mexico's Cultural *Mestizaje*: Rereading Some of the Most Popular Impressions of

⁶ Juan Piedra traces through language the introduction and development of the white aesthetic in Latin America.

Mexican National Identity," examines the recasting process undergone by some of the most popular images and cultural expressions of national identity. It uncovers how, through this officially supported procedure, the black root, intrinsic to the development of said images and cultural expressions, was removed or diluted to disappearance. This chapter focuses on the manner in which these images and expressions, once "cleansed" from any reference to their blackness, were widely publicized after 1920 and thereafter became some of the most telling impressions of national identity.

"*La vida inútil de Pito Pérez*: Tracking the Afro Contribution to the Mexican Picaresque Sense of Humor," Chapter Three, analyzes the Mexican landmark picaresque novel *La vida inútil de Pito Pérez*. It establishes a link between the first profane dances and songs of indisputable black roots and the popular Mexican satire, with *La vida inútil* and the sense of humor represented therein. It shows how the main character, Pito Pérez, essentially echoes Manuel Payno's characterization of the *mezclas*. These *mezclas*, which roamed the countryside and cities in very large numbers, were also known as "léperos," "pelados", or "pícaros," among other names. The chapter highlights the connection between *pícaros*, the Mexican sense of humor, and the *mezclas*.

Chapter Four, "*Angelitos negros*, a Film from the Golden Epoch of Mexican Cinema: The Coding of Visibly Black Mexicans in and Through a Far-reaching Medium," discloses how international black stereotypes are used to code black Mexicans in and through film. It documents that cinematography was utilized along with literature and other channels of mass persuasion as part of a

nationalist campaign to defame blacks while promoting whitening. This chapter exposes the racist discourse that went above and beyond cultural and linguistic barriers. It establishes a link between Hollywood's views and official Mexican views guided by black phobia and the white aesthetic in or around 1949, a time when *Angelitos* and other Mexican films such as *La negra Angustias* were made in Mexico.

The notion that the novel, *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* is a "new" way of telling the same stereotypical stories about blacks and their descendants is presented in Chapter Five, "*La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, a Post-Modern Nation Building Narrative: The Continued Cleansing of the Afro Component of Mexican *Mestizaje*." This part shows how through new structural technology the reader is penetrated to the unconscious where, through the reinforcement of preexisting symbols the author forges his negative images of blacks and their sons and daughters.

The objective of this study is to shed light on the manner in which the black African characteristics and the Afro legacy are narrated to disappearance or insignificance while coded under a white supremacy perspective in the following manners: by distorting or deliberately ignoring their beauty, their inner-strength and their world-views; and by misappropriating the Afro cultural contribution to Mexican *mestizaje*, a legacy imbedded in popular expressions such as dance, song, food and language.

In the works analyzed, black images are systematically portrayed within a process of assimilation through characteristics such as "green eyes" or other

white features. For black characters to be rebellious or to show intelligence, they have to be diluted, deliberately ignoring that blacks from the beginning of slavery began to revolt and that if they survived visibly until the present in Mexico, as well as in other parts of the "New World," it was not due to miscegenation with whites but in spite of it and due to their own intelligence and inner strength. Even where an author appears to recognize the Afro elements of a character, the analysis finds a narrative that distorts the image of Mexicans of African descent by bleaching them out and thereby, as Jackson has found in other works, denies the African characteristics of their physical features and thus their black identity (*The Black 2*).

This same ideology, based on the white aesthetic, was instrumental in plagiarizing the Afro legacy to Mexican-ness where it ascribed Spanish and Amerindian origins alone to various cultural expressions that became some of the most recognized badges of Mexican national identity, and for which the Afro element was and is essential. This analysis reads the works studied as part of the relationship between the ideology of *mestizaje* and the erasure of the Afro component of Mexican *mestizaje*.

Chapter One

Biological *Mestizaje*:

The Afro-Mexican and the Revolution: Making Afro-Mexicans Invisible
Through the Ideology of *Mestizaje*⁷ in *La raza cósmica*

The African presence in Mexico
as a whole has historically been minimized,
if not ignored or even denied.

Francis D. Althoff Jr.

[O]ne of the most interesting cases of
the Negro in Latin America is
the Negro that no longer exists.

Richard Pattee⁸

Homogenization as a civilizing act finds its
greatest expression in José Vasconcelos'
racism.

Miguel Alberto Bartolomé

José Vasconcelos (1882-1959),⁹ was the minister of education in

⁷ In the *Pequeño Larousse* dictionary of the Spanish language *mestizaje* is defined as the action and effects of adulterating or crossing races; it also defines a group of *mestizos* as those born to parents of different races. And "mestizo" is a synonym of bastard or hybrid. This is noted since from its inception the term is charged with negative connotations as do all terms that imply "impurity" of a sort or compare *Homo sapiens* to other animal species or plants. *Mestizos* are pure *Homo sapiens*. They certainly are not plants or any other type of animal species. Therefore terms like "mulatto" or "hybrid" which have been used for naming the offspring of animals, or plants or other species would have also a derogatory effect.

Another point to be stressed is that in *Black Writers in Latin America*, Jackson cites two types of *mestizaje*: positive and negative, "the first means a blending of cultures in which there is equal respect for [all cultures]. The second means that a minority culture is absorbed as an inferior culture" (14). The negative type guides Vasconcelos' idea of *mestizaje*.

⁸ As quoted by Richard L. Jackson (*The Black* 3).

⁹ Patrick J Carroll refers to him as "one of the earliest architects of the modern social order..." (Carroll 403).

Mexico from 1921 to 1924 at the onset of the cultural phase of the Mexican Revolution. His ideology on *mestizaje* has been studied from a historical perspective by Alan Knight in an essay titled "Racism, Revolution, and *Indigenismo*: Mexico, 1910-1940" (71-113). Knight identifies him as one in a string of eugenicists¹⁰ found all throughout Latin America and Europe at the end of the 19th century through the beginning of the 20th century when the newly independent Latin American states were trying to become nations. Knight believes that Vasconcelos' racism is "reverse discrimination"¹¹ and, like Carlos Monsiváis,¹² claims that Vasconcelos "shifted" to the "right" later on in life. The premise of this chapter is that Vasconcelos personified the right in the Mexico of his days. His views, which from the onset affected almost every dark Mexican—over 80% of the total population—were *criollo* views, a type of racism proudly

¹⁰ For a full account on eugenics in Mexico and other Latin American countries see Nancy Leys Stepan's *"The Hour of Eugenics:" Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991.

¹¹ After a brilliant presentation of the political events that served to shape the modern nation Knight concludes that Mexican intellectuals of the time were all practicing "reverse discrimination" whether by oppressing or by so called defending the vanquished. What he fails to see is that, on one hand those in power to enact the racist project of nation, oppressors and self-appointed defenders, were generally the sons of Europeans born in America, the *criollos*; on the other hand what he sees as "reverse discrimination" is applied in such a manner that could neutralize any further debate regarding racism and therefore racist practices and attitudes could not be debated leaving racism unchecked. It must be made clear that reverse discrimination would be possible presumably, if, and when, a group of the formerly called "inferior races" ascend to sovereign power and then justify the abuse to death of children, women and men, who share the same territory and time, on the basis of an idea of "otherness" such as that of "white supremacy."

¹² Carlos Monsiváis. *"Notas sobre la cultura mexicana en el siglo XX."* (1428). Full citation in bibliography.

described as *la cultura criolla* (*criollo* culture) by Samuel Ramos in 1963 (91-109). Miguel Alberto Bartolomé in 1997 explained that “homogenization as a civilizing act finds its greatest expression in José Vasconcelos’ racism.” He states that for Vasconcelos “the mestizo would be the ‘cosmic race,’” a sort of synthesis of all known “races called to hold world supremacy in the future” and therefore the logically determined referent in the process of national construction (28: n. 7). The present chapter will concentrate on Vasconcelos’ essay, *La raza cósmica: misión de la raza iberoamericana*.¹³

La raza, a book-length essay and travel memoirs, is a pillar in the foundation of modern Mexico’s national identity. Vasconcelos’ philosophy regarding “racial”¹⁴ and cultural mixing, manifested in *La raza*, had as the central goal the homogenization of all ethnicities in post-Revolution Mexico under the ideology of *mestizaje*.¹⁵ Miguel Alberto Bartolomé clarifies: “after the Revolution

¹³ Echoing the words pronounced by Nelson Mandela in 1962 during his trial in Pretoria, South Africa it should be made clear that none of what is said here is based on personal considerations, but on important questions beyond the parameters of this work itself. It should also be mentioned that there will be references made to Euro-centric ideology and white people, and that terms such as “race,” “black,” “Amerindian,” and “minorities,” among other heavily charged abstractions or “untruths,” will be used and therefore from the outset it has to be reiterated that “I am not a racist and that I despise racism because I consider it a barbarous thing, whether it comes from a black man or a white man. However, the nature of this [work] forces the utilization of the terminology to be employed” (Mandela 19).

¹⁴ Alan Knight in “Racism, Revolution, and *Indigenismo*: Mexico 1910-1940” proposes that the commonly used category of “race” has been rightly questioned. However, he calls this category “a belief of great power” deserving “analysis irrespective of [its] untruth” (75). This work subscribes to this premise.

¹⁵ Populist movements were sweeping the whole continent. The states created during the colony were trying to become nations and the idea of “civilization,”

of 1910 when the repression of cultural plurality became more intense, despite the rhetorical exegesis about the indigenous past, it was assumed that cultural homogenization was a necessary condition for the configuration of a modern nation" (27). To this explanation should be added that Vasconcelos' plan to Hispanicize Mexico, beyond its cultural aspects, included a racist¹⁶ agenda whereby Afro-Mexicans¹⁷ were portrayed as inferior and caricatured. This chapter analyzes, by going back in time with "new" critical tools, the ideology of *mestizaje* in *La raza* and the white aesthetics upon which it is based. While recognizing that the said ideology affected all "minorities" in Mexico, this chapter concentrates on how Vasconcelos' program affected children, women and men of African descent however inter-mixed in various proportions with Amerindians and Spaniards. It analyzes particularly the manner in which the discourse contained in Vasconcelos' program was used as a foundation of an ideology that, from the onset of the cultural phase of the Mexican Revolution in 1920, made Afro-Mexicans officially totally invisible at least until the mid 40s and that until

inherited from Europe, was equated with making all "minorities" into one homogeneous mass to the like of the leaders who either were *criollos* or people who believed as *criollos* did, that only white was beautiful.

¹⁶ Patrick J. Carroll defines racism as "a delineation and discrimination mainly based upon perceived physical characteristics, in particular the color of the skin...." (403). This definition is adopted in this study.

¹⁷ The prefix "Afro" refers to persons of African descent who constructed New World Afro-Mexican communities (Bennett i). The prefix is used today all over the Americas to signify the presence of African heritages and identities. For instance: Afro-Americans, Afro-Antilleans, Afro-Argentineans, Afro-Colombians, Afro-Cubans, Afro-Dominicans, Afro-Peruvians, Afro-Uruguayans, and Afro-Venezuelans, among others.

today has blurred their collective existence and cultural contributions to Mexican-ness (125).

To carry out the task set forth, the Afro-Hispanic-American critical approach followed in this study is first introduced. Second, a brief historical account is given as background, starting with the African Diaspora and quickly placing the reader at the time immediately after the armed phase of the Mexican Revolution when Vasconcelos enters the picture. Thereafter, Vasconcelos' beliefs are examined through the lens of Jackson's "black phobia and white aesthetics," paying special attention to the first 40 pages of *La raza* where Vasconcelos exposes his "doctrine for social and biological formation" (35).

It is demonstrated that in spite of a supposed total biological and cultural assimilation of Mexicans of African descent (Sepúlveda 101; Garrido 1, 60),¹⁸ in today's Mexico there are a number of Mexican communities, in more than one state, where the Afro element of *mestizaje* is visible.¹⁹ It is also shown that, due to the power of Vasconcelos' illusion, the existence of Afro-Mexicans was not

¹⁸ Felipe Garrido coordinated the edition of two volumes under the title of *Lecciones de Historia de México*, 'History Lessons of Mexico.' They are particularly interesting because on the one hand they are free texts from the ministry of education (SEP) utilized to teach what may be incomplete information as far as Afro-Mexicans go. On the other hand, they are to be noted because they are utilized as means for shaping the imaginary of Mexican grammar school students today.

¹⁹ In support of this, see the three following doctoral dissertations: Francis Daniel Althoff, Jr. "The Afro-Hispanic Speech of the Municipio of Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero." U of Florida, 1998; Herman Lee Bennett. "Lovers, family and friends: The formation of Afro-Mexico, 1580-1810." Duke U, 1993; and Anita González-El Hilali. "Performing Mestizaje: Official Culture and Identity in Veracruz, Mexico." U of Wisconsin, 1997. Also see, "The Black Mexico Home Page" by Bobby Vaughn.

acknowledged until the mid forties when the ethnologist and historian Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán carried out the first fieldwork in some communities with an obvious Afro-Mexican presence in the state of Guerrero on the South Pacific coast of Mexico.

The present chapter deals with what has been called the "racial" aspects of *mestizaje*, an ideology that while frequently understood as a breakaway move from the Euro-centric worldview, in fact only perpetuated racism under a different guise.

As in the rest of the work, this chapter incorporates Richard L. Jackson's perspective whereby he explains:

Following a tradition dramatized in Hispanic Literature from Lope de Rueda's *Eufemia* (1576) to the present, the heritage of white racial consciousness, in Spanish America, as in Brazil and the non-Iberian countries, defines superior and inferior as well as the concept of beauty in terms of light and dark, that is, on the strength of the amount of whiteness one has. ("Black Phobia..." 467)

It is also argued that Jackson's views on the ideology of *mestizaje* stand acceptable. For Jackson, Vasconcelos' *mestizaje* type or negative *mestizaje*²⁰ is "the process of restoring whiteness by bleaching out black people," a method called "ethnic lynching" that "has long been accepted in Latin America as a means of solving social and racial problems." A solution, as he points out, based

²⁰ For Jackson positive *mestizaje* "means a blending of cultures in which there is equal respect for both. [Negative *mestizaje*] means that a minority culture is absorbed as an inferior culture" (*Black* 14).

on "the expectation that the biological superiority of the white race, augmented in number through European immigration, would impose itself on the non-white races" (*The Black* 3). Jackson also stresses: "the process of *mestizaje*, though of questionable value to the development of the black identity, is nevertheless, an indisputable fact of the black experience in Latin America" (*The Black* xv).

Attention should be drawn to the fact that negative *mestizaje*, or whitening was uncovered by the Martinican psychiatrist, Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin White Masks* in 1952 and that since then has been exposed in Brazil by Abdias do Nascimento in, *O genocidio do negro brasileiro: processo de um racismo mascarado* (*The Genocide of the Brazilian Black: The Process of a Masked Racism*) in 1978, and that the Costa Rican, Quince Duncan in his "*Racismo: apuntes para una teoría general del racismo*" ("Racism: Notes for a General Theory on Racism") exposes it as "*psicocidio racista*" (racist psychocide). Duncan explains that by stigmatizing and diminishing everything related to black and indigenous populations, and by omitting their history and culture from the official history and culture "a process of ideological whitening is carried out by which the victim comes to feel disdain for herself and for everything that has to do with her and her race" (53).

Vera Kutzinski, in a reference by Edward J. Mullen, defines *mestizaje* as:

a peculiar form of multiculturalism, one that has circulated in the Caribbean and in Hispanic America, most notoriously in Brazil, as a series of discursive formations tied to nationalist interests and

ideologies. This multiculturalism acknowledges, indeed celebrates, racial diversity while at the same time disavowing divisive social realities. (23)

Kutzinski's insight is of paramount importance in explaining Mexican post-revolution indigenista discourse—which includes Afro-Mexicans under their mestizo hat—on ethnic relations, that casts the impression of a supposed ethnic harmony in Mexico. Ted Vincent elaborates:

Racial amnesia over African roots is common in Latin America, and usually can be traced to the master-slave relationship, which even after slavery is abolished leaves a belief among many dark complexioned Latin Americans that a successful life is one in which the children are lighter hued. Mexico puts an unusual twist on the Latin drift towards being white. In Mexico it is O.K. to stop at brown on the way to becoming white. Mexico calls itself "the cosmic race." (2)

What is the African Diaspora and what is its relationship to the problem to be discussed here? Until 1873 black people, principally young women and men, were taken out of Africa by force to be used as slaves for sex and work in Japan, China, Indonesia, Tasmania, India, Arabia, Europe and the Americas. In the 19th century Africans also were among "the convict labor Britain sent to Australia from England, the West Indies, Mauritius and South Africa" (Harris 9).

The black African slaves taken to New Spain, today's Mexico, arrived mainly through the port of Veracruz. From there, they were taken all over the

colony. The exact number of slaves taken to New Spain “legally” and illegally is unknown. What is known is that their presence became noticeable by the third quarter of the 16th century and that by the time of the War of Independence (1819-1821) black African blood, in different proportions, ran in the veins of Mexican mestizos, who, until then, had been classified into more than a dozen “racial” mixes known as *castas*²¹ or *mezclas* from which about 80% refers to “racial” mixes where the black African element is present. It is also known that from the beginning of the Africans’ arrival in New Spain, just as in other places of the New World, many of the slaves ran away and formed villages in hard-to-reach places. These rebels would be known as Maroons and their sagas became part of a narrative yet to be explored.

In Mexico slavery became illegal in 1829. By then the large number of *castas*, and the cheap labor they represented, made the import and keep of slaves a luxury. Meanwhile, the newly created nation was up for grabs and undergoing a series of internal struggles for power. It is at this juncture that the idea of *mestizaje* emerged. The State, which still was not a nation, was searching for a formula, an idea that would serve as cohesion for a deeply fractured population. According to Agustín Basave Benítez, the idea of *mestizaje*, in the beginning, ascribed the lack of order and anarchy to the “racial” varieties found in the population and therefore it sought to eradicate them. The idea of *mestizaje* became then “a long-lived nationalist intellectual movement that

²¹ Cecilia Rabell Romero defines *castas* as racial hybrids of black people of African descent (Carroll 431). This work adopts this definition.

presented *mestizaje* as the quintessence of Mexican-ness" (15).

Basave cites Jose María Luis Mora, priest, politician and author of *Mexico y sus revoluciones (Mexico and its Revolutions)*, as expressing in 1849, "The need not only to end the uprisings of the *castas*, but to make them impossible thereafter, and the only way to achieve this is the fusion of all races and colors present in the Republic into one" (Basave 24). The idea of *mestizaje* continued to grow under the shadows of other Euro-centric ideologies in the 19th century, such as liberalism, and it was not until after 1920 that it was officially instituted during Álvaro Obregón's government.

After ridding himself of Venustiano Carranza (1859-1920), Álvaro Obregón (1880-1928) became president of Mexico on November 30, 1920, as the armed phase of the Mexican Revolution was coming to an end. Obregón appointed José Vasconcelos as his minister of education (Ramírez 217).²² This appointment would have dire consequences for non-Spanish ethnicities, which reverberate throughout Mexico to this day. Blacks, Amerindians, and dark mestizos, the majority of the Mexican population, with their languages, and cultural complexity, from the onset of the birth of modern Mexico would be cut off from Vasconcelos' vision of a super "race."²³

The Revolution of 1910-1920²⁴ became, toward the end, an all out war of

²² This is how the last name is spelled in the source.

²³ In a *post-scriptum* to a 1904 edition of *War and Peace*, Leo Tolstoy discusses how no individual alone makes the history of the life of nations (Tolstoy 429). This work subscribes to that view.

²⁴ An 1810 population census conducted by the Spanish stated that the African

small armies, each led by a caudillo and this further divided a State that had been trying to emerge as a nation since the War of Independence against Spain (1810-1821). Many people, tired of divisionism and fighting, embraced at face value Vasconcelos' program of one "Latin-American" Mexico for all. What they may not have understood, however, was that by carrying out his education program, Vasconcelos would not only try to impose the European Spanish language upon all,²⁵ but would sow his views on "race," obscuring the true ethnic make-up of most of the fourteen million people who survived the Revolution.²⁶ Although *mestizaje* ideology had been in the making for quite some time in Mexico,²⁷ Vasconcelos is a key figure because he was encouraged by those in

and Afro-Mexican population in Mexico was reported at 10 %. By 1910 there are no numbers to be found but it may be presumed that the percentages remained the same for there are no reports to disprove this (Vincent 2).

²⁵ According to Martín Luis Guzmán, Jorge Vera Estañol, Minister of Public Instruction in the later part of Díaz' dictatorship wrote the "*Escuelas Rudimentarias*" 'rudimentary schools' project. Its purpose was: "to teach Castilian, the alphabet, and the fundamental rules of arithmetic to the *irredenta* indigenous class, particularly to those living away from civilized centers, in the mountains and in the country" (Guzmán 21). Vasconcelos receives recognition for his "ambitious campaign *Alfabeto, pan y jabón* [alphabet, bread and soap]" that basically is the twin of Vera Estañol's project (Garrido 2: 80). Agustín Basave Benítez points out as well that Vasconcelos ideology was influenced by his "good friend" Andrés Molina Enriquez, a *mestizófilo*: a scholar of Mexican *mestizaje* (Basave 72, 114).

²⁶ Garrido says that according to the population census of 1910, at the beginning of the Revolution there were more than fifteen million people and in 1921, following the Revolution the population was about fourteen million (Garrido: 2, 92).

²⁷ For a comprehensive account of the history of *mestizaje* in Mexico see Agustín Basave Benítez's *México Mestizo: Análisis del nacionalismo mexicano en torno a la mestizofilia de Andrés Molina Enriquez*. México, D.F.: Fondo, 1992.

power to put theory into practice. Hugh Thomas mentions: "In Mexico over 6,000 schools were built by the villages themselves, without cost, by men on holiday, according to the ideas of a 'missionary' turned architect. Annexes in the shape of shower baths, sports fields, kitchens, among others, were sometimes added" (702 n. 32). Gabriela Mistral, as cited by Itzhak Bar-Lewaw, recounts that Vasconcelos was given great resources to "civilize Mexico" and that "for the first time in the history of [Latin American] countries an education budget surpassed the United States education budget" (Bar-Lewaw 38). Paradoxically, even Mistral believed that for the first time American gold was being used for the superior interests of a people (Bar-Lewaw 39).

But what were the majority of people, the so-called minorities, saying about the government program of "education" meant to assimilate them into a culture that in fact excluded their ethnicities? After three hundred years of colonial rule, where education for the vanquished did not exist, and another one hundred years of factional wars, illiteracy in Castilian Spanish was widespread in the Mexico of 1920. Spanish was the language of the ruling class. The majority of Mexican people spoke either Spanish as a second language, Pidgin Spanish, or did not speak Spanish at all.

Compounding the problem for the majority of Mexicans, although some means of communication had been established during the Porfiriato (1876-1910)²⁸, on the one hand, was the fact that Mexico's interior was still largely cut

²⁸ It is interesting to note that the former general Porfirio Díaz, an Indian from Oaxaca who distinguished himself in the battle of Puebla against the French Invasion during the Juárez government, despised his fellow Indians, called them

off from the urban centers. On the other hand, the small towns and villages were cut off from one another, thereby making it nearly impossible to organize any meaningful opposition. Toward the end of the armed phase of the Revolution the population at large literally had no voice, and where spokespeople had emerged, like Emiliano Zapata and Francisco Villa, they had been silenced. In some cases, such as Venustiano Carranza and Alvaro Obregón, the spokespeople became the oppressors.

Moreover, another consideration regarding the majority's silence may be found in the following clarification that, although taken from the Antillean context, is relevant here; Komla F. Aggor cites Frantz Fanon who elucidates: "persons of African heritage tend to dislike and be ashamed of their own race not because of any intrinsic inferiority complex but as the result of being made inferior" (Aggor 503). This becomes pertinent here after considering that the great majority of Mexicans by the 1900s were the descendants of *mezclas* or *castas* of which, as mentioned before, about 80% included the black African element at a greater or lesser percentage.²⁹ Furthermore, according to the *criollo* creed on "races," the Amerindians were inferior too and the *criollos* continued to make Amerindians and their descendants believe so as well. That is, the black and Amerindian

"boys", became a positivist and a Francophile. Also, "Porfirian prosperity didn't reach the majority of the population. The millions of pesos [profit for concessions of natural resources made to England and France] were kept in the hands of an aristocracy small in numbers and dressed in frock coats, and of a growing middle class with half a million members dressed with slacks and coats. Almost none of Mexico's wealth reached the masses who wore shirts and white indigenous *calzones*" (Garrido 2: 63).

²⁹ This colonial racial classification is explained in detail in Aguirre 163-179.

roots involved in the make-up of these people had been, and continued to be, regarded as traits of inferiority by all. What could these "minorities" do in such a situation? For the most part, they became taciturn and as inconspicuous as possible and in this manner they cooperated by omission with Vasconcelos' program for uniting the nation through homogenization. In this way, the path to achieve the total denial of the African component in Mexico's true identity began (Vincent 1-9).³⁰

In 1971 Aguirre Beltrán, looking retrospectively, would declare in an updated prologue to his 1946 *La población negra de México (The Black Population of Mexico)*:

all one has to do is give a quick look at the literature of 1910 to 1940, the crucial years of the revolutionary movement, to notice the preponderance of social studies on the Indian and, consequently, the absence of any mentioning of blacks as a sector of the population that in one or another manner could have contributed in the formation of the Mexican nationality. (9)

The "racial" and cultural ideology disseminated under Obregón and Vasconcelos

³⁰ Ted Vincent notes that, "Mexico has a fourth race if one adds the descendants of the 100,000 Asian slaves brought to Mexico on the colonial Manila to Acapulco route. Since the law decreed that only Africans could be slaves, and the Spanish wanted more slaves, the Asians were declared Africans" (Vincent 2). For a complementary study on racism and xenophobia against the Chinese part of the Asian population in Mexico see José Jorge Gómez Izquierdo's *El movimiento antichino en México (1871-1934)*. México, D.F.: INAH, 1991. It should be added that actually there were other racial and ethnic components. It is true that black Africans were the majority of the slaves brought to New Spain, but not all the Africans were black; there were Arab slaves, Greek slaves, and the slaves from the Levant (Aguirre 99-113).

in the early 20s through the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* (Ministry of Public Education) and via other means of mass persuasion such as the use of missionary teachers, radio, cinematography, literature and art, made "minorities" of black African descent invisible³¹ in Mexico.

Aguirre Beltrán would find out in the mid 40s:

in all cases where *mestizaje* in Mexico is spoken of, the authors make exclusive reference to the mix of the white dominating population and the defeated American population. Nobody is careful to consider the part that belongs to blacks in the integration of a culture in Mexico. (9)

Nina S. Friedemann, referring to the process of making a people invisible in Colombia, applicable to the case of Afro-Mexicans here, explains:

The invisibility in sociocultural processes is a strategy that ignores the present, the history, and the rights, of ethnic minorities. Its exercise implies the use of stereotypes, understood as absurd reductions of the cultural complexity, which pejoratively blur the reality of the groups thus made victims. (138)

In *La población negra* mentioned above, Aguirre Beltrán, 46 years after the publication of *La raza*, still not free from Vasconcelos' spell, and under the belief that the black population in Mexico would bleach out eventually, referred to this blurring as "integration." And although at the end of his complex explanation

³¹ According to a recent unpublished commentary made by Richard L. Jackson "invisible" is a "key word all over Latin America" (November 1999).

he concedes that "there are a few black nuclei," he considers "integration" as an ongoing "process" (277-280). Nevertheless, 28 years after Aguirre's revision, these black enclaves continue to flourish, although until very recently they have been excluded from the collective memory by first diluting their very existence and then by caricaturing or ridiculing their image later.

Bobby Vaughn, based on the 1990 population census, reports "29 largely Afro-Mexican communities" in Guerrero and Oaxaca alone with a total population of 66,381.³² Also, in a recent article by Jesús Ramírez Cuevas, Estela Ramírez, a representative from the Sierra Zapoteca Sur, while describing the situation of the indigenous people to members of the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN)* (*Zapatista Army for National Liberation*) reports that "from three and a half million Oaxacans, half are Amerindians and blacks" (2). Luz María Martínez Montiel in "Mexico's Third Root" explains: "[a]lthough strongest in black enclaves like Costa Chica, the African presence pervades Mexican culture. In story and legend, music and dance, proverb and song, the legacy of Africa touches the life of every Mexican" (2). She emphasizes the difficulty of tracing any one tradition as purely African after "five hundred years of blending with

³² Reports on the number of visibly black Mexicans in the country as a whole vary from 200,000 to 600,000, and of course these numbers, arbitrary as they may be, do not include the millions of Mexican "blacks" who appear white, "Amerindian", or "mestizo" (Esteva-Fabregat 305). Even so, Colin A. Palmer expressed: "as their ancestors did, the few remaining persons who are visibly of African descent continue to be productive members of society. But history has not been kind to the achievements of African peoples in Mexico. It is only within recent times that their lives have been studied and their contributions to Mexican society illuminated. Suffice it to say that contemporary black Mexicans can claim this proud legacy and draw strength from it..." (Palmer 3).

traditions of Indians and Europeans,” and points out:

Compounding the difficulty is the fact that the African elements in Mexico's culture are not acknowledged as they are in other countries of the Americas. In fact “*el mestizaje*,” the official ideology that defines Mexico's culture as a blend of European and Indigenous influences, completely ignores the contributions of the nation's third root. (2)

Worthy of mention here is that in spite of Friedemann's perspective about the negative impact of the blurring of ethnic complexities, Aguirre Beltrán's outdated views of a supposed integration process of Afro-Mexicans are still being taught in Mexican schools (Garrido: 1, 60).

Carlos Monsiváis points out that Vasconcelos, under the belief that “to educate” is “to populate,” sought “to incorporate into the nation the indigenous minorities through the national school system,” because Vasconcelos thought that Amerindians were “Mexicans first and then Indians.” Moreover, Monsiváis explains that Vasconcelos was convinced that, “the indigenous dialects [could] not be educational tools,” that “they [should] be eliminated giving way to the Spanish language,” and that “the Indians [would] have to make this last acknowledgement of the victory of the conquerors.” According to Monsiváis, Vasconcelos opposed Manuel Gamio's plan for ‘integral action’ (where he had “broken the nation into ten Indian regions for betterment and educational special projects”) under the argument that “the politics of educating the Indian...in accordance with separate norms of any kind, not only is absurd among us, but it

would be fatal" (Notas 1419).

This, of course, must not be construed as implying that Manuel Gamio (1916-) was opposed to Vasconcelos. Although Gamio is one of the precursors of *indigenismo* (revaluing of Amerindians), and he encouraged Aguirre Beltrán to study Afro-Mexicans, Bartolomé indicates that for Gamio:

the idea of nationality pre-supposed the homogenization of cultures (he called it 'fusion') of the races and the linguistic unification of the State's inhabitants, this perspective guided the *indigenista* scholars for more than a half century in their fundamental task: to help in the construction of the nation. (27: n. 7)

According to Castro Gómez "the reduction of all cultural differences to one principle—a *mestizismo* or romanticized *indigenismo*—was the route to insure the emergence of a popular State that would guarantee at the same time 'national unity' " (142). This homogenizing strategy was a vehicle to take control of the nation. The *criollo* minority wanted to take the power from the mestizo majority. By implanting the illusion of a super or "cosmic race," which everyone belonged to, the *criollos*, who already had the power of the Spanish language at hand, would gain and monopolize power by promoting the idea that everyone had a common past. Suddenly—as if by magic—Cuahutémoc and Moctezuma would become their "cultural" if not their "racial" ancestors.

Monsiváis said that in the 40s Vasconcelos, worn out and petrified by an ideological precipice, was supporting dictatorships such as Franco's in Spain, and thereafter became a symbol for the extreme right. He also points out that,

therefore, the reconsideration of his works has been made difficult (Notas 1428). Nevertheless, the following reading of *La raza* will reveal that, in fact, Vasconcelos' views since 1925 reflected the same extreme right tendencies of two of the most influential Latin American "homegrown racists" who adopted, with extreme ease, European versions of racism, namely, Carlos Octavio Bunge and José Ingenieros (Jackson, *The Black* 36).

At this juncture, two points should be emphasized: that Vasconcelos was not alone in his eugenicist thinking for he belonged to a string of influential eugenicist thinkers of his time; and that thinkers such as José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi (1776- 1827) among many others, were accessible to Vasconcelos for his illumination. Therefore, Vasconcelos' thinking cannot be dismissed on the grounds of being "a product of his time" alone since the "lenses" to allow him to see, well beyond the colors he chose to see and induced a whole nation to see, were at his disposal at least since the publication of *El Periquillo Sarniento* (*The Mangy Parrot*) (1816).

At first glance *La raza* is a manifesto in defense of humanity, a declaration based on the concept of universality full of love and understanding for the oppressed. When viewed under Jackson's lens on white aesthetics, it is clear that Vasconcelos' understanding of universality is intolerant of diversity.³³ He rejects the concept of a sum of parts forming a whole. Instead, he sees a whole made-up by the disintegration, assimilation, eradication, or homogenization of the

³³ For a deeper insight beyond the issue here, see Martín Luis Guzmán's *Obras Completas* 1: 1399-1404, 1443 where Miguel de Unamuno is quoted referring to Vasconcelos as a "confusionist."

culturally diverse presence and roots comprising Mexican-ness³⁴ at the time he is formulating his doctrine.

Vasconcelos named his higher "race," "the cosmic race." According to him, this "cosmic being" would result from the natural and voluntary mixing of the best traits of all "races." Vasconcelos' "new race" would be superior to all known "races" (14-15). He claimed that love, specifically Christian love, was the foundation of his program (35). According to Santiago Castro Gómez: while "Idealizing *mestizaje*, Vasconcelos speaks of a 'cosmic race' that will unify the planet in a community ruled by voluntary union, harmony and beauty." Castro places him among late 19th and early 20th century modernists, like Leopoldo Lugones and José Enrique Rodó, who exalted the aesthetic values of the "Latin culture," sharing this romantic eagerness for unity, happiness and redemption (141).

Vasconcelos utilized the first forty pages of *La raza* to spell out his doctrine on a superior being comprising what he calls "the fifth race" or "the cosmic race." He began his recital by explaining his theory of the evolution of the human species. He believed that "a race developed, and after progressing and decaying was substituted by another" (2). According to Vasconcelos, there had been four stages of human development: he placed the "black" man in the

³⁴ It may be interesting to point out that *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* and *Merriam-Webster* define "mestizo" in two totally different manners between the 1956 and 1995 editions. In 1956 mestizo is defined: "Esp. in Spanish America and the Philipines a person of mixed blood; esp., the offspring of a European and (East) Indian, Negro, or Malay; often, Phil. I., a person of Chinese and native blood." In 1995, citing 1582 as the year of the word's origin it defines: "a person of mixed blood; specif: a person of mixed European and American Indian ancestry."

beginning of the process; in the second stage he mentioned a "red" man; in his third stage appeared a "yellow" man; and in the fourth, or most advanced, stage of his evolution theory he placed the "white" man (1). This posture echoes the Frenchman, Joseph Arthur Gobineau's views (1855) on the hierarchy of "races:" white, yellow and black. According to Gobineau, only the "white or 'Aryan' race, the creator of civilization, possessed the supreme human virtues of love of freedom and honor... His essay was used by the Nazis as proof of their racial supremacy" (Simon 1).

Vasconcelos divided white people into Saxons and Latinos, the former represented by English and Dutch, the latter by Spanish and Portuguese. He conceded that Saxons have the political and economical control of the Americas, and used these pages to issue a call for Latin Americans to transcend their political divisionism, of Saxon creation according to him, and to unite to confront the Saxons (4-8). Castro Gómez explains:

In Vasconcelos we find also an identification of the "Latin spirit," characteristic in Hispanic America, with the intuition of life, with feeling, with the irrational and beauty. [Vasconcelos] affirms that while the Saxon civilization is founded on human dominance over the material world, in Latin America a race of synthesis is being formed that will seek the orientation of its conduct, not with pragmatic reason, but rather in feeling and love. Such a contrast between "Latin" and "Anglo-Saxon" symbolizes, at the bottom, the opposition between order (embodied in the idealism of the

Hispanic-catholic culture) and "chaos" (embodied in the North American pragmatism and voluntarism), where order is understood as a synonym of harmony, and "chaos" as a synonym of "dissonance." In this manner a social imaginary is created where society and culture are governed by ideals of universality and consonance. (131)

Vasconcelos' pseudoscientific theory of "racial" evolution is a contradiction of modern scientific evidence. According to Luz María Martínez Montiel the existence of humanity can be traced back two and a half million years. She explains:

The history of Africa in its beginning is the history of the appearance and evolution of man, the development of human groups, their dispersion and the formation of societies whose way of life, technical inventions, traditions and cultures have a significant place in universal history. Its importance is definitive among the rest of the nations and peoples of the world; notwithstanding, that history is little known. (*Negros* 25)

José Vasconcelos was unable to conceive that all human groups including those present in Mexico actually are, all and each one, the product of millions of years of evolution of the *Homo sapiens* species.

Vasconcelos proposed in *La raza* a type of *mestizaje* that was supposed to have allowed what he called "inferior races" to transcend their biological, social and spiritual condition. Pointing out similar characteristics of inherent superiority,

Jackson denotes two patterns in Latin American ethnic relations. The first, a "pattern characterized largely by white racism, slavery and racial oppression..." found wherever there are or there have been black women and men. The second "is embodied in the concept of miscegenation or *mestizaje*, a process that, while loosely defined as ethnic and cultural fusion, is often understood to mean the physical, spiritual and cultural rape of black people" (*The Black 1*).

Moreover, in his study of Afro-Mexico, Patrick Carroll states that:

given their slave condition, their ethnic group and color, the Spanish saw Africans and their descendants, whether enslaved or free, with their discernible physical characteristics, as inferior. Indians also found reasons to limit their contact with black Americans, identifying them, just as Spanish did, as foreigners based on race and ethnic group. (432)

Carroll explains that "the Catholic church supported secular authorities in maintaining the system of *castas*..." and by studying marriage records reports that in the 16th and 17th centuries he found that, white women, although still relatively few, "would hardly marry outside of their racial group" (413), and that during the same periods white men, "abided by the racist and ethnocentric social order" with few of them marrying outside of their racial group" (415).

According to Vasconcelos the "fifth universal race, fruit of the ones before, and betterment of the past ones" (4) was supposed to trace its origins in "the abundance of love that allowed the Spaniards to create a new race with Indians and blacks" (14). While it is true that there was a wide process of amalgamation

of various human ethnicities in Mexico, most of the mixing of whites with Amerindians or *castas* took place outside of wedlock, for the marriage records and the physical characteristics of the Mexican population are contradictory. On the one hand, Spaniards would seldom marry outside of their group and, when they did, it was with *criollos* or, as a last resort, with "Euro-mestizos," or mestizos who appear as white. On the other hand, according to Aguirre Beltrán, by 1570 the growing mestizo population in New Spain reflects a greater amount of mixing activity outside of matrimony between the Spanish, the Indian, and *castas* populations (210). This indicates that mixing between whites and their supposed inferiors took place more than what was officially accepted, and that bastard³⁵ children or "*hijos de la chingada*" (sons of bitches) were walking around everywhere as living proof of their fathers' actions. In further support of this Enrique Florescano has said:

Even when the *castas* were numerically and socially important from the middle of the 16th century, they are almost not registered in that century or in the following. Since they were offspring of non-formalized sexual relations, they had an occult or disguised social life. This group came to be the more discriminated by written and non-written laws, and the greatest social prejudices were concentrated against this group. (211)

Was that the result of love? According to Martín Luis Guzmán, who knew

³⁵ Basave Benítez points out that soon after the new "race" was being created "*mestizaje*" and "bastard" became synonyms (Basave 18).

Vasconcelos personally:

this Spanish man that Vasconcelos describes (and whom we can speak of with total frankness because we are all a reference to him) is so non-existent and arbitrary that, page-by-page, the history of Hispanicism denies it. (1402)

Vasconcelos' understanding of history and worldview did not end there. He also mentioned "Chinese who reproduce as mice" which, according to him, is "proof of lower zoological instincts;" he sympathized with and justified the rejection of this "race" by "the superior ones" (17). His charge against Asians continued when he described, "the Mongol with the mystery of his oblique eye, that sees all in accordance with a strange angle" (19). According to José Jorge Gómez Izquierdo, "xenophobia and racism acquired a presence in the ideology of the Revolution from its onset. This ideology helped to create the sense of national identity among Mexicans" (88).

Jackson draws attention to the fact that negative images of dark skinned people "reflecting nineteenth century mentality on race, surprisingly, have not been completely discarded in the twentieth century" (*The Black* 36). Furthermore, this ideology in post-revolutionary Mexico, beyond being embraced, was disseminated; it was used as a foundation in the making of "the modern social order" (Carroll 403). Jackson points out that the negative opinions "of New World intellectuals" are inherited from "the old prejudices of the colonial ruling classes" that had these intellectuals "convinced of the inferiority of the dark races" (*The Black* 36).

Vasconcelos portrayed blacks as "eager for sensual happiness, inebriated with dances and wild lust," while he presents whites as having a "clear mind... similar to their complexion and their fantasies" (19). The sensuality ascribed to blacks, the dance and lust, are examples of "preconceptions, misconceptions and stereotypes" that "while giving false if not one-sided images of the black, at the same time help indicate racist feelings toward black people among Latin-American authors." They are prejudices that, beyond damaging the black image, perpetuate the myths that "depict blacks as an inferior jungle beast, a provider of [entertainment]" (*The Black* 45, 46). Vasconcelos' literary representation of whites, blacks and others evokes the two separate worlds that developed in Mexico after the arrival of the Spanish. Ted Vincent's description of these worlds may help explain further how mentalities, such as Vasconcelos', were formed:

The Mexican elite had mansions, a university, monasteries, numerous cities to visit in, great governmental buildings to hang out in, and had the bishop's cloister for social teas and poetry readings. A tight and exclusive circle of wealthy whites and their lackeys hid in the mansions drinking Spanish wine, eating "white" bread, and practicing the 'Minuet.' Out in the town square, the dark-hued people created Mexico, with tequila, tortillas and *La Bamba*. (5)

Bans were issued on musical expressions from the beginning to the end of the Colonial period because they "allegedly caused delinquent behavior and exhibited licentious African body movements" (Vincent 5). Arturo Melgoza says, "we know that blacks would gather in the central square of Mexico City to sing

and dance...." He allows the reader to perceive the cultural value of the African manifestations of self-consciousness in Mexico (73), something that José Vasconcelos failed to understand.

Vasconcelos accepted what he called "the higher ideals of white men" (23) and envisioned that "perhaps among all characters of the fifth race white characters will dominate." He explained also that "such a supremacy must be the fruit of free election" (23). His subscription to the bleaching out of dark people is evident when he said, "In the Iberoamerican world... we have very few blacks and the majority of them have been transformed already into mulatto populations" and that "the Indian is a good bridge for *mestizaje*" (25).

Vasconcelos' aesthetics, the white aesthetics, found in the literature of other parts of the Americas, materializes when he asks, "why should it matter that all races mix if ugliness will find no cradle?" He predicted that in his utopian nation-state "the poverty, the defective education, the scarcity of beautiful types, the misery that turns people ugly," would all disappear (29). He explained that if up to his time there had been no great improvement of the species, it was due to the living conditions of "agglomeration and misery, where it has not been possible for the free instinct of beauty to work." He believed that "reproduction has been carried out like beasts without limit in quantity and without aspiration for improvement" and to satisfy the sexual appetite in any way possible while ignoring the spirit (30).

It becomes obvious that Vasconcelos thought very little of the physical and cultural mixing that had taken place for over four centuries, up to the post-

Revolutionary era when he says: "we are not in a position to even imagine the modalities and the effects of a series of interbreeding truly inspired." He believed that "unions founded in the capacity and the beauty of the type, would have to produce a great number of individuals gifted with the dominant qualities."

Vasconcelos saw them "electing immediately, not through reflection but by taste, the qualities that [he] wish[es] to predominate." He was certain that "the recessive offspring would not unite among themselves, but instead would search for quick improvement or would extinguish voluntarily all its desire to reproduce physically." He expounded, "from this, the black man, for example, could be redeemed; and little by little, by voluntary extinction the ugliest types [all non-'White' people] would give way to the more beautiful" (29-31).

In Vasconcelos' view:

the inferior races, after becoming educated, would be less prolific, and the better specimens will ascend in a scale of ethnic improvement whose ultimate type is not precisely the white man but a new race that whites themselves would have to aspire to be in order to conquer the synthesis. (31)

In Vasconcelos' model "the Indian, by hybridizing with his related race, would jump the thousands of years that mediate between Atlantis [where they originate, according to his theory] and our epoch" (31). He believed that "in a few decades of eugenic aesthetics blacks could disappear along with those types marked by [his idea of] beauty as fundamentally recessive [and therefore] unworthy of reproduction" (30-31).

Vasconcelos' doctrine for *mestizaje*, as depicted above, was based on the extinction of what he saw as lower types of humans. However, he explained clearly that his theory differed from "brutal Darwinist selection" due to the fact that "interracial" mixing in his model would be a result of taste (31). In his doctrine he found justification for his perspective because he was willing to mix with other "races," while the English would not dare because they "think blacks are a species closer to apes than to white man" (32). He taught, "every ascending culture needs to construct its own philosophy." He saw himself as the philosopher of Mexico and charged that "we have been educated under the humiliating influence of a philosophy developed by our enemies," and that because of it "we ourselves have come to believe in the inferiority of the mestizo, in the non redemption of the Indian, in the condemnation of blacks, in the irreparable decadence of Orientals" (33).

Vasconcelos proposed the need to "reconstruct our ideology and organize according to a new ethnic doctrine our continental life as a whole" (33). He underlined that "Christianity frees and engenders life because it contains a universal revelation in itself" and sees Jesus Christ as "the author of the greatest movement in history" (34). There are two points to be emphasized here. On the one hand, Vasconcelos, still a symbol of a secular revolution, promoted religion although it had been constitutionally banned from education since 1857 after the Reform War. On the other, the *Cristero* war (1924-1929) was brewing during the time of his conceptions in *La raza*, and his thinking could not be construed as

helping the side he represented.³⁶ Vasconcelos saw "Christianity consummated not in the souls but in the roots of beings" (37).

Vasconcelos believed that all factors needed for his "fifth race" were present in the Iberian part of the continent alone, namely: spirit, "race," and land. He explained that there and then "the universal era of humanity could be started" because the "Nordic man, master of action," was present along with "the black man with a reserve of potentialities that come from the remote days of *Lemuria*"³⁷ (39) and "the Indian who saw Atlantis perish but who keeps a quiet mystery in his conscience" (39). José Vasconcelos thought that all peoples and all abilities were there and that the one thing lacking was "the true love to organize and set on its way the law of history..." to create "the first universal culture, truly cosmic" (39).

José Vasconcelos' views on *mestizaje* have started to be questioned recently, perhaps as a result of the Civil Rights, Black is Beautiful, and Chicano Power movements in the United States, the Cuban Revolution and other no less important movements in favor of a black identity throughout the Americas and the world. This can be observed where Patrick J. Carroll mentions that there are two

³⁶ I thank my brother and colleague for reminding me that the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, UNAM*, (The Mexican National Autonomous University) owes its logo—"por mi raza hablará el espíritu" (my spirit shall speak for my race)—to Vasconcelos.

³⁷ The Lemurs, mythological beings between Romans and Etruscans, were the ghosts of the dead. Interesting also is that lemurs are a subclass of primate mammals from Madagascar in Africa and from Malaysia. Ted Vincent relates that the black slaves from Asia came from Malaysia, New Guinea, and the southern Philippine Islands, including the island of *Negros* so named because the *Negritos* lived there (Vincent 2).

ways to understand how blacks were "almost forgotten" even when "their descendants supplied one of the greatest—if not the principal proportionally speaking—contributions to the *mestizaje*" (404). He analyzed Afro-Mexicans in Veracruz and concluded, "An initial analysis of Afroveracruzanos suggests that their role, active or proactive, in the process of social interweaving between whites and Indians, eventually drove them to become almost racially and ethnically extinct." But Carroll points out:

a more detailed analysis offers an alternative reading of history; the *Afroveracruzanos*' mediating vision helped in creating a social order of *castas*. This new social system did not predominate in central Veracruz or in the rest of the nation but until the end of the XIX century, when the *castas* came close to the status of being the majority among the general population. The modifications/ mediations of the black Americans left a heritage in the region, which evolved before the persistent social and legal pressures from Spanish and Indians against them. (436-437)

Carroll also raises the question as to whether Veracruz' situation may be typical of the Mexican nation as a whole or just a sum of rare regional variants in the evolution of Mexico's *mestizaje*, and concludes that the case in Veracruz is typical of the role played by Afro-Mexicans in the process of *mestizaje* in New Spain (429).

In terms of how the Afro-Mexican was finally erased officially as a "racial"

and ethnic minority³⁸ from memory after the Revolution, Juan Carlos Ramírez Pimienta's comments, unknowingly, offer an interesting insight:

[E]ducation is going to become one of the main factors for cohesion in post-revolutionary Mexico. In fact almost immediately at the end of the armed phase of the Revolution Alvaro Obregón appoints José Vasconcelos as the Minister of Education. He starts immediately an ambitious literacy campaign. The object—says Heuer—is to bring spiritually closer all groups in the country, that is to say, homogenize Mexicans by giving them a federalized education, in other words, the same history, with the same heroes, same past and the same country to sacrifice for. (217)

Vasconcelos' doctrine regarding a *mestizaje* creator of a cosmic man, in fact, masked Mexico's heterogeneity. This doctrine, while supposedly aimed at bringing everybody to an illusory mainstream, in truth was targeted at doing the opposite. His ideology was put into practice through an all-out government campaign to create one country through education, art, and mass media: "Vasconcelos was the first to capture and realize, while being minister [of education] the functional concept that modern aesthetics has found in the phenomenon of mural painting and on the diffusion of music for the humble Mexican masses" (Bar 76). This campaign blurred all Mexicans who were not

³⁸ It is important to keep in mind that from the onset of the colonial period Afro or visibly black Mexicans had a concealed or disguised social life due to the fact that for the most part they were offspring of illegitimate sexual relations.

white enough from the nation-state project³⁹ particularly the *mezclas*, *castas* or Afro-Mexicans.

For instance, all of the mestizos who did not look white enough were not represented in cinematography during the first half of the 20th century. In this manner they were made invisible and cast out of the ideal mestizo image through one of the most popular means of mass persuasion. Jackson cites Richard Pattee as pointing out that “[o]ne of the most interesting cases of the Negro in Latin America is the Negro that no longer exists” (*The Black 3*). Moreover, the most famous images of the Mexican Indian in cinema were cast by actors like Pedro Armendáriz and Ignacio López Tarso, that is Euro-mestizos. Ramírez asks: “is it possible to think that the PRI-government⁴⁰ did not design and implement a cultural policy to help it stay in power?” and explains: “[w]e can think that this project is only a manifestation, the most important perhaps, the branch of a nationalistic unifying intention that as well covers literature and the plastic arts” (Ramírez 211).⁴¹ At the end of his essay Ramírez inquires whether Mexico’s homogenizing policy worked, and responds: “Yes, to a certain point

³⁹ *Ethnologue Online* reports 295 languages in Mexico, one of which is Spanish (Grimes).

⁴⁰ PRI stands for *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (Revolutionary Institutional Party). This party was in power continuously since the end of the armed phase of the Revolution of 1910-1920 until the year 2000 when Vicente Fox Quesada from the rightist catholic *Partido de Acción Nacional* (National Action Party) won the elections.

⁴¹ For a discussion on the “muralist art” as propaganda, see Melgoza’s interview with Rufino Tamayo in *El crepúsculo de los últimos gigantes*. México, D.F.: SEP: Plaza y Valdés, 1989.

although it started falling apart during the sixties⁴² and the student revolt.” He also points out that the late Zapatista rebellion in Chiapas (1994-) is proof that there are still “great sectors [of the population] that were never part of the national project” (Ramírez 221).

The Afro-Mexicans, once out of sight, were soon forgotten.⁴³ And all of the blacks that appeared to be Euro-mestizos or Indo-mestizos quickly learned to deny their heritage. María Teresa Sepúlveda’s 1983 ethnohistorical work is an example of the far-reaching effects of Vasconcelos policy of the 20s. She professes:

[t]he black ripped naked from his region of origin, was unable to construct in New Spain the culture he belonged to; being a minority he was soon forced to mix biologically and culturally with the indigenous and mestizos adopting behavioral patterns from these groups. (Sepúlveda 101)

Sepúlveda acknowledges that in cases where blacks were really isolated they were able to keep some of their African cultural features, but she erases them physically from the population and finds that Mexico inherited from black Africa only some magical beliefs (101-03). She disseminates another two-pronged

⁴² Jackson has pointed out that during this period is “the advent of ‘Black is Beautiful.’” It may be added as well that during those days some Afro-American athletes during the 1968 Olympics in Mexico displayed “Black Power” by raising high their right hand fists covered with black gloves.

⁴³ For a greater insight in the workings of government propaganda see Chomsky’s *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*. New York: Seven Stries, 1997 (1st ed, 1991).

myth when she proposes that blacks were "imported," due to their physical strength, to do the work that "frail" Indians could not do. On one hand, it should be asked how the fierce warriors encountered by the Spaniards became "frail"? Was it not the inhuman treatment received and the imported diseases that nearly extinguished the Amerindian population? (Galeano 58, 59; McCaa 11-14). On the other hand, as far as the black man's strength is concerned, Aguirre Beltrán explains:

When it was a matter of justifying blacks' enslavement and their introduction to American lands, it was said that a black man was worth four Indians, meaning that the work effort of a black man was equivalent to that of four Indians. Later on it was even said that a black man could resist rougher work than the white man. In this manner the myth of the black man's physical superiority over the Indian and the white man was established as a means of subjecting the black man to the most barbarous exploitation. (180)

Aguirre emphasizes as well that blacks were capable of doing more work, not owing to the fact that they were black, but because they had been hand-picked for the task: the majority of black men and women brought to the "New World" under the slave trade were on average between the ages of 18 and 22 "the majority being 18" (180). These black men were in the prime of physical strength due to both age and to the fact that the trader would normally pick the biggest and strongest among all to receive a better price. Even so, there was a 15% death rate in the ocean crossing, and once at the work site, because of the

inhuman treatment, they would last an average of "7 to 15 years" (Aguirre 180-182). Thus, Sepúlveda's teachings, under new light, can now be seen to be influenced by José Vasconcelos' racist ideology on *mestizaje*.

But what happened to the Afro-Mexican after Vasconcelos' ideology became a "reality"? In 1946 Aguirre Beltrán declared that in Mexico, "especially after the Revolution there [was] no racist consciousness." He argued that in the Mexican census the data on "race" [was] not collected because "it is the law," and because "in a hybrid population such as ours this data would be illusory." He pointed out that even the word "race" had the tendency "to disappear from the official terminology" (178).

The key to understanding what happened to blacks in Mexico after the Revolution can be found in two of Aguirre Beltrán's words: "law" and "official." The existence of a law and an official doctrine that made all Mexicans "equal" served only to mask what Aguirre identified elsewhere as the genuine "racist thinking of the conqueror" (172), a white racist thinking adopted and cultivated for hundreds of years among the Mexican population at large. Regarding this dominant ideology in Mexico, José Revueltas explains:

The rareness, the strangeness of the dominant ideology, already institutionalized as a whole in the Constitution of 1857, of laws and of juridical policies of the State, rests particularly on the fact that the great indigenous masses are kept cut off from it, they don't belong to it, they are 'foreign' to that national consciousness, yet to become a total historical auto-consciousness. (149)

Now, it is true that in Mexico since 1821 "the distinctions by color of the dermis disappeared officially" (Ochoa 38). Also, it may be correct to say that the majority of the population in Mexico are mestizos, but only in the sense of describing humans whose genetic make-up is black African, Amerindian and Spanish, among others. It is also true that among the population today there is still a preference for the Euro-mestizo. A good example of this can be found in popular sayings such as "*la mona aunque se vista de seda, mona se queda*," (an ape dressed in silk, still is an ape), or "*cafre*," "*grifo*," and "*coyote*," among other words that, although today signify something other than the original meaning which referred to racial mixtures, were nevertheless adopted with negative connotations into Mexican Spanish.

Another example can be found in the Mexican immigration laws where the history of white racism is well documented. For instance, a certain Francisco Pimentel is recorded as saying in 1866 that Mexico needed foreign colonization to "augment and improve" the country's population (González Navarro v. I, 500). Also, in the same source, public opposition to black immigrants is documented in the newspaper, *El Monitor Republicano*, where blacks are characterized as "lazier, dissolute, and less intelligent than the Indian;" while white people are said to be "the most active, the most intelligent, in one word the most civilized" (González Navarro v. II, 185). Between 1926 and 1931 the immigration to Mexico of foreign workers was restricted and "justified with openly racist arguments" as it was officially declared in 1928 that "it was mandatory to improve the race through *mestizaje* and this could not be achieved by yoking Mexicans

with individuals from insignificant lineage." In the following paragraph it is explained that a great effort was taken to impede the entrance of blacks under the light of this opinion (González Navarro v. III, 34). But perhaps the most illustrative example can be found in the images of the "Mexican prototype" found in movies, television, newspapers and magazines.⁴⁴

The consequences of the racist mentality and the white aesthetic reflected in *La raza* have yet to be fully studied because, as Bartolomé highlights:

Even today, and in spite of the pluralist discourse and rhetoric, the concrete ideological and political practice reproduces the constituted historical block and points toward the homogenization of diversity assuming that differences are a motive for inequality.

One of the dramatic concrete consequences of this political model has been the destruction of a great number of native societies: [...] the cultural suicide called ethnocide. (29)

An ethnic relations policy that ignores, dilutes and/or makes people disappear at will should be questioned at its roots. It must be traced through history in all forms of expression and/or means of mass persuasion, including literature

⁴⁴ Alan Riding in *Distant Neighbors*, points out that "...half the models used on television are European or American [Caucasians], including many seductive blue-eyed blondes. In a country where less than 5 percent of the population is of pure Caucasian blood, the message is that things go better for white fair-haired 'foreigners'" (Riding 313). Also, on September 15, 1998 *Reforma*, a Mexican daily, published an add from "Herdez," a food Company, that says, "On September live the happiness of tradition and paint with our colors your heart." The add is a rectangle, the majority occupied by a tri-color heart (green, white and red, the colors of the Mexican flag) with a photograph of a happy well fed white baby covering the center of the said heart (Viva).

(canonic and popular) and cinematography. This is to take place with the new tools provided by multidisciplinary perspectives inclusive of the black experience and the vision of the vanquished. All facts, including what has been kept silent or conveniently forgotten, must be exposed for a fully informed debate based on all evidence, no matter how shocking or disturbing.

Under existing legal and academic views it should be clear that "what was considered a civilizing act, based on a universalistic humanism, now is practically definable as a major offense: ethnocide" (Bartolomé 28). The homogenizing activities started by Vasconcelos in the 20s, carried on by many others in Mexico until today, need to be investigated further to understand their consequences, that is, the manner in which they have affected and are affecting humanity directly and or indirectly. The existence of an Afro-Mexican population and an Afro-Mexican ethnic heritage is little known in Mexico and in the world at large. The Afro-Mexican contributions to Mexican society as a whole and to humanity as a whole by extension are yet to be recognized.

The black phobia and white aesthetics found in part of Mexican literature and the arts embraced officially and even academically, are part of a pattern in the Americas wherever there have been or there are black men and black women. Perhaps this is why what is discussed here may not appear new and may even seem to be a "worn out issue." In Mexico, progress in the area of ethnic relations will be difficult unless a closer look is taken at the ongoing debate on ethnic relations in other parts of the Americas such as Brazil, Cuba and the United States, and among other countries where black populations are

developing a sense of ethnic identity and a feeling of self-worth. Mexico as a whole, by denying its roots, will sadly continue to be a case of mistaken identity. On the issue of diversity in Mexico, Victor Zúñiga explains that following the Revolution of 1910-1920, new forms of rhetorical inclusion of "minorities" were designed in Mexico: "the existence of a Mexican mosaic" was admitted, "but this didn't change substantially the nineteenth-century project for social balancing supported until today by the myth of *mestizaje*" (246).

Mexico's project for entering modernity, as far as it relates to its social and ethnic diversity, was nearsighted. It was developed upon 19th century beliefs: "it did not take into consideration the presence of the 'others'... an enormous number of Mexicans that do not fit into the official definition of the nation" (Zúñiga 247). Moreover, and as Zúñiga continues:

one of the most surprising characteristics of the historical and political discourse about the nation in Mexico is its marked resistance to considering openly the question of cultural, linguistic and ethnic differences. Until a very few years ago we lacked all types of juridical or political discourse, no matter how weak, about the question of differences. (248-149)

Rowe and Schelling, in dealing with the problem of identity in Brazil, point out how Gilbert Freyre's transformation of the mestizo and characterization of Brazil as a " 'racial democracy,' reinforced the ideal of whitening because it led to the widespread notion that Brazil's racial problems were being solved through ethnic integration, whose goal remained white civilization." They also explain

that it was Abdias do Nascimento, an Afro-Brazilian playwright, who pointed out that "a crucial consequence of the persistence of this ideal... [was] the absence of a significant black consciousness movement" that prevented the achievement of "racial" identification and thus self-determination. Rowe and Schelling highlight as well that in do Nascimento's view "concepts such as miscegenation, acculturation and assimilation are in fact euphemisms for the sexual exploitation of [Afro-Brazilian] women and the gradual annihilation of [Afro-Brazilian] culture" (Rowe 42).

In Cuba, the debate on Afro-Cuban expression, and curiously enough "the dialogue" with the United States on the subject, exists. Cuba, as in the case of the United States, has fostered the academic literary study of its African component, and although it may be argued that there is still much to accomplish, what cannot be denied is that the Afro-Cuban presence and literary contribution to Cuba's, and by extension to Latin America's, identity is a fact today.⁴⁵ Cuba's achievements in ethnic relations, despite allegations that it is lagging behind, could throw some light on the problem of ethnic relations in Mexico.

Moreover, African blacks of the Diaspora to the Americas, in general, had very similar experiences in the European colonies on this continent.⁴⁶ In all

⁴⁵ For one of the latest and most comprehensive studies on the subject see Edward J. Mullen's *Afro-Cuban Literature: Critical Junctures*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998.

⁴⁶ For a detailed account see Eduardo Galeano, *Las venas abiertas de América Latina*. México, D.F.: Siglo XXI, 1980 (53d ed.); Hugh Thomas, *Cuba or the Pursuit of Freedom*. New York: Da Capo, 1998 (1971 1st ed.); and Ronald Seagal, *The Black Diaspora*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995.

instances they were enslaved, relegated to forced labor, and in all colonial societies there is extensive documentation about their use and sexual abuse. The Africans of the diaspora to the United States were no exception. Afro-Americans are *Afromestizos* as well, in the sense of having Amerindian and European blood in them, just as Afro-Mexicans do.

One may ask: how is it that African-Americans have developed a sense of identity and self worth, even when "mestizo-scholars" argue that Anglo-Saxon racism is the worst type? This, while the presence of people of African descent in Mexico is still being denied or dismissed by the prejudicial, absurd, and simplistic argument that chants in Mexico "we all are Mexicans." Is there a "better" type of racism? What will it take to implement international charters, constitutional laws, decrees, declarations, policies on paper that have been officially condemning racism in theory for quite some time? When and how will it be learned that racism is but an attitude generated by sheer ignorance and that the very idea upon which this attitude is based is a fallacy, a socially defined illusion, a fruit of a poisonous tree that has caused, and continues to cause, an unacceptable level of human suffering?

A full answer to these questions is beyond the parameters of this chapter. However, and for the expressed purpose here, it may suffice to state that while people who respond to that mentality in Latin America were and have been engaged in "confusionist" ideologies like Vasconcelos' negative *mestizaje*, trying to bleach out its black populations, their Northern counterparts had a clearly marked apartheid system, a system that even today collects census based on

"race,"⁴⁷ where all Afro-Americans and Afro-American-mestizos are grouped together, paradoxically, making them a very visible "minority."

It was precisely this apartheid system that forced African-Americans to look into themselves in search of identity, as there was no hope of entering the mainstream. Langston Hughes (1902-1967), in a video tape, explains that "In the case of the Negro [in USA] of course we have been free for one hundred years, but aren't integrated to democracy...[and he points out that] people who are apart from the mainstream of life develop... ways of their own" (Voices). These views, the African-American experience, clearly reflected in their literature, music, dance, and cinematography, among other genres, form a voice universally known today. The presence of African-Americans is irrefutably visible in the world nowadays.

And what is the connection of the above with the Afro-Mexican situation? What if Afro-Mexicans just want to see themselves as Mexicans, period? What if they are content with things as they are? It is the premise of this work that all humans as individuals are equal and have an equal right to self-determination. The arguments that "there are but relatively few mestizos in Mexico with African characteristics left today" and that "they are on their way to extinction," or are "undergoing a process of integration," are not sufficiently valid in themselves to continue disenfranchising a single person in Mexico. It is anti-constitutional to do

⁴⁷ It should be mentioned that the classification of "Hispanic," that groups Asians, blacks, Amerindians, and whites from south of the Río Bravo as a single "race" echoes the *criollo* deliberate indifference and insensibility to ethnic diversity. It is an imposition that denies the multiculturalism of the people arbitrarily grouped under the said classification and only adds to the confusion.

so and violates the United Nations Charter on Human Rights. Moreover, to allow materials like *La raza cósmica* to continue to circulate unchecked is inconsistent with the Modern Language Association's resolution of December 28, 1973, cited by Jackson, regarding "lingering racist ideas and materials" where the academic community is urged to "organize and support activities to... expose the anti-humanist and unscientific character of racist materials..." (*The Black* xiv).

The racist ideas spelled out in the prologue to Vasconcelos' *La raza* and contained in the rest of his memoirs fall clearly under the above-mentioned resolution. His white aesthetic and phobia for non-white people are worthy of study only as far as they open up a window to a world view that pervaded Mexico at the turn of the century and that still lingers on today among many of the Mexicans from the many Mexicos who are yet to discover a truer picture of themselves. Given his influence, Vasconcelos must be studied in order to understand the process of disenfranchisement that so-called minorities, including Afro-Mexicans, underwent as the homogenizing ideology behind *mestizaje* was put into practice and propagated through schools, art, and mass media channels of persuasion.

Chapter Two

The Forgotten Black African Root⁴⁸ of Mexico's Cultural *Mestizaje*: Rereading Some of the Most Popular Impressions of Mexican National Identity

The mestizo dimension of our dance...
originates from the encounter of the
indigenous with the Spanish and the
black.

Gloria Contreras⁴⁹

*Jarocho*⁵⁰ dancing, particularly during
the colonial period, was one of the
expressive forums for the articulation of
African cultural consciousness.

Anita González El-Hilali

Mexico⁵¹ is a "thousand countries with one name" (Fuentes 274). People with a diverse ethnic make-up inhabit the country. Today most Mexicans speak various Spanish dialects as the result of hundreds of years of interchange willing and unwilling among people from Africa, America, Asia, and Europe. Mexican *mestizaje*, the so-called "miscegenation" and cultural "hybridization,"⁵² is a mix of mixes. Its African, Amerindian, Asian, and European components are all the

⁴⁸ María de la Luz Martínez Montiel calls it "The Third Root" (Martínez, Mexico's 2).

⁴⁹ Melgoza (170).

⁵⁰ According to Aguirre Beltrán, the first Afro-Mestizos received different names in the different regions of New Spain (169). He reports also, "Jarocho was the name given in the region of Veracruz to the mix of black and Indian" (179).

⁵¹ In 1995 it is reported that 88% of the total population speak Spanish and "8% speak Indian languages ... the number of languages listed for Mexico is 295. Of those, 289 are living languages and 6 are extinct." There are also 400, 000 people registered as "Arabic" and 31,000 as "Chinese" (Grimes 1).

⁵² Néstor García Canclini uses the concept "hybrid cultures" in *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. Trans. Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 1995.

result of previous ethnic amalgamations. As with all known cultures, Mexican ethnicity, a culture of cultures, has its own complex set of expressions which reinforce national identity.

The preceding chapter presented how the Afro-Mexicans were officially "bleached out" or practically erased from national memory. It revealed that this was achieved through an all-out government campaign of mass persuasion, including public education, the arts and the mass media, a strategy that created a narrative of nation exclusive of Mexico's Afro roots. It analyzed the racist elements found in *La raza cósmica* and dealt with the "prejudice of not having prejudices,"⁵³ found in the ideology of *mestizaje* in Mexico and in its dire consequences which reverberate throughout Mexico to this day and continue "to imprint a colonial hue on interethnic relations" (Bartolomé 300).

This chapter explores the plagiarizing of Afro-Mexican ethnic contributions to Mexican *mestizaje*. It discloses that various Mexican popular cultural expressions found in dance, song, food, and speech have "forgotten" or no longer recognize their African roots (or other roots) claiming to be "mestizo" expressions exclusively of Amerindian and Spanish origins. This section subscribes to the premise that the Africans taken to innumerable parts of the world, including Mexico, like all humans, were carriers of ethnicities dating back two and a half million years, and that their descendants have modified the

⁵³ A paraphrase made by Miguel Alberto Bartolomé in "Indians and Afro-Mexicans at the end of the Century" from the words of the Brazilian Floristán Fernández (Bartolomé 300). It refers to a person who is oblivious of non-white people's plight against the white superiority syndrome.

cultural expressions of the places where they have been or are present.⁵⁴

The popular impressions of Mexican national identity to be studied currently are of elemental value in laying the foundation of a perspective that here, in the following chapters of this study, and in future works, including how visibly black Mexicans are caricatured in comics,⁵⁵ will enhance the understanding of the depth of the black African presence in Mexican-ness. It will also help to understand the manner in which this type of cultural "cleansing" occurred and the negative effects it continues to have as far as a Mexican national identity that negates one of its major roots.

To achieve this goal, immediately after discussing the perspective on popular cultures to be adopted, a brief look will be taken into three of the major ethnic roots involved in the configuration of today's Mexican-ness, namely: the African, the American, and the European civilizations. It will be shown how the cultures from the civilizations involved in Mexican *mestizaje* were mestizo cultures themselves, just like every culture known, prior to coming together in "New Spain."

Second, the development of the originally Afro-Mexican *jarocho* dancing and singing from Veracruz will be analyzed, as well as its influence on: (1) the

⁵⁴ The intention of this work is to give credit where it belongs: the main focus is the black African contribution to a "racial" and cultural *mestizaje* without taking credit away from the other roots that are just as important to Mexican *mestizaje*.

⁵⁵ The comics studied as vehicles for mass persuasion under Richard Jackson's Afro-Hispanic-American optic would include *Memín Pingüín*, a Mexican publication of a black single mother and her "devilish" son of impressive circulation from the 50s to the 70s that contributed to caricaturing the Afro-Mexican image.

sones⁵⁶ of Costa Chica, a southern Pacific coastal zone, located in the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca; and (2) the *mariachi* song and dance from "a region in western Mexico that includes what are today the states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Zacatecas, Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Michoacan, and Colima; a region extending as far north as Sinaloa and Durango and as far south as Guerrero" (Clark 1). The *jarocho* and the *mariachi* are two of the popular badges, or images most telling of Mexican-ness in and outside of today's Mexico. These characters appear in literary works such as Manuel Payno's *Los bandidos de Río Frío*, and *El Zarco* by Ignacio Manuel Altamirano that are yet to be read under Jackson's Afro-Hispanic-American lens.

Third, the origins of the "menudo stew" which appears in *La vida inútil de Pito Pérez* (Romero 13) will be traced to prevent partial translations such as Cord's translation as "stew" (4) or as "meal" (87). *Menudo* stew is an offspring of Congo's *mondongo*, and in its "mestizo" form today is a typical Mexican dish that can be found wherever there are *mariachis* or *fandangos*.

Finally, a concise look will be given at the originally Bantu verb *chingar*, a word that differentiates Mexican Spanish from other Spanish dialects.⁵⁷ *Chingar*,

⁵⁶ "*Jarocho* 'son' is a song and dance tradition that synthesizes African improvisation, poly-rhythm, and buck-board dancing with Native American dance patterns and Spanish *zapateado* footwork. Musicians play '*jarana*' (a type of guitar), '*pandero*' (tambourine), and '*arpa*' (harp) while dancers challenge one another. Rhythmic heel beats punctuate strummed melodies of songs whose lyrics tell of love and lust. People of coastal towns such as Alvarado and Tlacotalpan dance *jarocho* to celebrate almost every holiday or feast day" (González-El 139).

⁵⁷ According to Mario Pei a dialect is a "specific form of a given language, spoken in a certain locality or geographic area, showing sufficient differences from the

as is common knowledge today, is one of the most representative speech forms of Mexican popular heritage. Understanding the black African origins of this piece of "poetry," as Octavio Paz has called it, together with the other pieces of the puzzle mentioned above, sheds additional light in reading literary works, such as: *El perfil del hombre y la cultura en México*, *El laberinto de la soledad*, and *La muerte de Artemio Cruz*, among others, from a perspective inclusive of the black experience.

As a preamble to this analysis of the African legacy in Mexican popular cultures, it would seem appropriate to discuss the meaning of "popular cultures" used here. According to Rowe and Schelling, mass culture ["cinema, radio, comics, fotonovelas⁵⁸ and, above all, television" (7)] and popular culture are not the same. However, they recognize their interrelation and explain that "[w]hen the popular is defined not as an object, a meaning or a social group, but as a site--or, more accurately, a series of dispersed sites--then it generates a principle of opposition to the idea, imposed by authoritarian liberalism or by populism, of the nation as a single body." They also emphasize, "The notion of dispersed sites is not the same as pluralism." In pluralism the state is given a "neutral" place and that cannot be said in the case of societies (as in the case of Mexico) where the state has sought to "homogenize culture in order to consolidate the

standard or literary form of that language, as to pronunciation, grammatical construction, and idiomatic usage of words, to be considered a distinct entity, yet not sufficiently distinct from other dialects of the language to be regarded as a different language" (56).

⁵⁸ A magazine type developed from the comic format where photographs are used instead of illustrations.

power of the ruling classes." Rowe and Schelling point out that "culture is inseparable from relationships of power" (10).⁵⁹ Thus, keeping in mind the difference between mass culture and popular cultures, a concise historical account of three of the roots of Mexican cultural blends will follow.

According to Luz María Martínez Montiel, in *Negros en América*, the Iron Age preceded the Bronze Age in Africa. Africa is viewed today as the cradle of humanity and civilization. Regarding the means of communication, she explains:

During thousands of millennia [the zone called black] Africa did not have writing. The means of narrative and ideological expression were unknown; yet the constant process of emotional thinking is recorded. This is the reason why the African, from pre-historical times, produces engravings, paintings, music and dance that are akin to visual or auditory dynamics that manifest, beyond an idea, human emotions. (38)

She also explains that aside from the Egyptian, all other African systems of communication at the time the slave trade took place were based on corporal and emotional expressions or non-verbal communication (39). It is of paramount importance to keep this in mind in understanding that black slaves, as with any humans, were cultural entities; that like any other human beings they would try to protect their identity. Furthermore, the cultural texts contained in their dances

⁵⁹ In the perspective adopted here, a symbol of popular culture ceases to be when it is absorbed by the homogenizing agents: for instance, the image of the *charro* (Jalisco cowboy) and the *china* is but a mass media bleached out image of the original "*chinaco*" and "*china*" from Puebla.

and songs, and in the dances and songs that developed from the intercultural exchanges they underwent, hold a voice that is more than verbal, and that, in the case of Mexico, has yet to be heard.

The African people who were brought to New Spain starting from the middle of the 16th century, according to Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, included "White slaves," "slaves from the Levant" and "black slaves" principally from a three to four hundred kilometer strip located in the coastal region of West Africa between the Senegal and Coanza rivers (102-104). The "White slaves" were the people taken in the war against Islam. The greater part of these people were from Morocco: "Moors, Berbers, Jewish and *Loros* that came to the Western Indies accompanying their masters...." The entrance of these "infidels" to the Spanish colony in America was forbidden (although this interdiction was not always respected) by the Catholic Church in the 16th century. Among these slaves were the Berbers, who are known to be one of the earliest settlers of North Africa in "Tripoli, Tunisia, and Algeria and are said to be descendants of the ancient Libyans" (Aguirre 104). The Libyans throughout the centuries received "biological and cultural contributions from the Phoenicians first, then from the Arabs, and later from the blacks in different proportions" (Aguirre 104). The Moors are also the result of the mixing of various groups of people who, when they "entered in contact with blacks absorbed a considerable quantity of color" (Aguirre 105). The "true black" people, who were by far the majority of the slaves brought to New Spain, were themselves mestizos of mestizos, a result of the amalgamation of diverse black African peoples and cultures, or of black African and Arab, or of

European and African peoples and cultures. For instance, Aguirre Beltrán mentions the Fula, a people originally Caucasoid who, after mixing, had become predominantly black and who were confused with the Mandingos when brought to the colony (110). The number of ethnic groups these people came from is too large to mention here, but Aguirre Beltrán gives a detailed account, and for the purpose at hand it may suffice to mention that they came from Guinea, Sierra Leone, and São Jorge da Mina, São Thome, and Manicongo.⁶⁰

The "European" colonial component of Mexican *mestizaje* comes principally from what is known today as Northern Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, and has an Asian component as well. To dispel this apparent confusion, a brief discussion of the history of the various peoples and cultures that populated the Iberian region from its origins until the invasion of America will follow. John A. Crow states that the Iberians "a small, wiry, dark-complexioned race... probably began to arrive in Spain from northern Africa around 3000 B.C." (24). Around the twelfth century B.C.E., the "Phoenicians, a Semitic race of the Canaanite branch" began doing business in the area. They are said to have founded the port cities of Cadiz and Malaga (25). Around 900 B.C.E. the Celts, a Nordic people, started to arrive and established themselves in the northern portion of the Iberian Peninsula. The Greeks came to Spain at about 600 B.C.E. "they came first as traders but later established several trading posts mainly along the Mediterranean coast... and also possibly along the northern Cantabrian shores"

⁶⁰ There were slaves from India and other Asian lands brought to Mexico as well (Aguirre Beltrán 148).

(26). In the third century B.C.E. the powerful Phoenicians from Carthage, in North Africa, invaded Spain under the leadership of Hamilcar Barca. Barcelona derives its name from him, and Cartagena is a legacy of this period. By 205 B.C.E. the last Carthaginians were forced out by the Romans and returned to Africa. The Romans dominated and colonized Spain and by 19 B.C.E.

"Hispania... became the granary of Rome and the wealthiest province of the empire" (29). The Roman Empire itself was a mosaic of people and cultures extending from parts of today's England to northern Africa and parts of Asia. In the 5th century the Germanic warlike Visigoths conquered Hispania, a place peopled by Vandals, Suevi, and Alani who had invaded the peninsula in 409 A.C.E. The Visigoths, a semi-civilized people, forced the Vandals out of southern Spain and into North Africa, and dominated Spain until 711 when the Moors arrived from North Africa. The Moors stayed for the next eight hundred years. They brought no women along but took local women as spouses. Clearly, Spain was born from the mixing of many peoples and many cultures. The Spanish mestizos that came to America were as African as they were European or Asian, ethnically and culturally speaking, and unless it is shown otherwise, history as it is written today points in that direction.

The Amerindian people who populated the land that would become Mexico were probably as heterogeneous as the invaders and their slaves. And, although the differences that exist among Amerindians is as little understood as the differences among other people, the fact remains that in the land known today as Mexico, there were many different thriving nations with long histories

and large urban concentrations. There were people, such as the Aztecs, who had conquered and subjugated others, and whose empires covered vast areas and a large number of peoples by the time the newcomers arrived.

The history of the people of the area before their documented encounter with Europe, Africa and Asia is classified in three periods: The Formative, from approximately 2000 B.C.E. until 100 A.C.E.; The Classic, from about 100 A.C.E. until 900 A.C.E.; and The Post-Classic, from about 900 A.C.E. until the arrival of the new people. The Olmecs occupied the tropical lands of what is Veracruz today from 1500 B.C.E. until 100 A.C.E. Their influence extended well into Central America and they left a vast cultural legacy. One of their best-known pieces of artwork is the colossal Olmeca head.⁶¹

The next period is marked by the culture that flourished in Teotihuacan with the descendants of the Olmecs between 300 and 600 A.C.E. and the Zapotecs, from about 500 A.C.E. until the arrival of the Spanish, Africans and Asians. The Zapotecs lived in what is today Oaxaca. Between 800 A.C.E. and 1100 A.C.E., after the Teotihuacans' disappearance, the Nahuatl speaking Toltecs emerged. Tula, in today's Hidalgo, was their cultural center. Their architectural influence extended into southern Mexico. Circa 900 A.C.E., six other groups of Nahuatlacans arrived in Central Mexico and, while they were

⁶¹ This head is very interesting when paired with the Brazilian information about the human fossil "Luiza" unveiled recently. They reopen the page for the investigation of pre-Colombian people in the Americas. Luiza is a "woman's skull with features like an Australian aborigine" and is said to be 11,500 years old ("America's..."). The Olmec head shows features that have been ascribed to black Africans and of course is dated well before the recorded arrival of the Spanish and Africans to America.

settling their political boundaries, a seventh group left Aztlan. This group was "constituted in seven calpullis [clans]: the Yopicans, the Tlalcochalcans, the Huitznahuacans, the Chihuateopanecans, the Tlacateopanecans, the Izquitecans and the Aztecs. According to the Mexicayotl Chronicle, the god Huitzilopochtli gathered these seven clans and, before they left from their unknown place of origin to central Mexico, told them they were now Mexicans (Basañez 62).

After many wars and alliances with the people that had arrived before them, these Mexicans ended as prisoners of war and they gained their freedom only after defeating the Xochimilcans and taking eight thousand ears from their prisoners to the Culhuacans in 1323. The Mexicans or Aztecs arrived in 1325 at the island in Lake Texcoco that would become the center of their empire. Until just before the arrival of Hernán Cortés in 1519, the Aztec empire would extend throughout all of central Mexico and as far south as northern Central America. "Only the domains of Michoacan, Tlaxcala, Metztitlan, Yopitzinco and Totepec remained independent from Mexico-Tenochtitlan" (Basañez 74). The Mayans, the other advanced civilization of Mesoamerica, inhabited the southern region of Mexico and had a long history as well, but by the 15th century "the wars among Mayans and other groups led to their destruction and to the final decadence of their civilization" (Kattan-Ibarra, 27). There were many other important nations in Mexico as well. Today, 56 groups of the descendants of the original Amerindians, comprising about 12 million people, have been identified (Zúñiga 247). They speak some 289 living languages (Grimes 1).

Before turning to the black African cultural legacy to Mexican *mestizaje*, it

must be emphasized that the "blood" of the pre-Colombian people referred to above runs in the veins of most of today's more or less 100 million Mexicans, along with Spanish blood and African blood in various percentages.⁶² According to Patrick Carroll, there are two ways of looking at this mix: on the one hand there is the notion that the African element disappeared through *mestizaje* from the population at large, as José Vasconcelos and the people he represents affirmed. This notion is an example of *negative mestizaje*. On the other hand *positive mestizaje* can be seen when "a more detailed analysis offers an alternative reading of history" which states that "a long time after the end of the 19th century ... the *castas* were close to the status of majority among the general population." In essence, Mexican mestizos—the overwhelming majority of Mexicans today—are as African as they are anything else (436-437).

In his book of essays *Estampas de nacionalismo popular mexicano* (*Pictures of Mexican Popular Nationalism*), Ricardo Pérez Montfort refers to various local and foreign 19th-century chroniclers describing the picture of a

⁶² For an extensive account of "blood mixes" and percentages found in Mestizo-America see Claudio Esteva-Fabregat's *Mestizaje in Iberian-America* where he points out the existence of millions of "Blacks who appear white" in the United States alone, a window that allows a reasonable person to see the additional millions of this phenotype all over the Americas (Esteva 305). The north American Sinclair Lewis, the 1930 Nobel Prize winner, in his novel *Kingsbloodroyal* (1947) deals with the "white superiority syndrome" in the United States. According to Jackson this is a condition marked by "a fraudulent denial of an African heritage, though running the risk of discovery" (*The Black* 10). Francisco Arriví exposes this problem in Puerto Rico in his play *Vejigantes* (1958); and the Mexican playwright Celestino Gorostiza analyzes it in a roundabout manner in *El color de nuestra piel* (1952); and Frantz Fanon diagnoses it in *Black Skin White Masks* (1952).

"chinaco" and a "china"⁶³ dancing the *jarabe*⁶⁴ as the image of a "typical Mexican fiesta" (Pérez Monfort 23). Arturo Melgoza Paralizábal, in *El maravilloso monstruo alado* (*The Marvelous Winged Monster*), a book-length essay-interview with Gloria Contreras, states that the mestizo dimension of the popular dances that "people all over Mexico dance," has its roots at the meeting point of the pre-Hispanic cultures, the Spanish cultures and the black African cultures (15, 17). Mexico is no exception in the Americas. The undeniable black African musical development present all over the continent in every adopted language --*bomba*, *contradanza*, *cumbia*, *cumaná*, *charanga*, *guarachá*, *jazz*, *mambo*, *merengue*, *plena*, rhythm & blues (or as, it became known in its bleached out name, rock 'n'

⁶³ "Chino" (Chinese) was the name given to Asian slaves, whether Chinese or not, brought through Acapulco in the yearly *Galeón de la China* (Galleon from China) without interruption until Independence (Aguirre 49-52). The name "china" or "chino" was applied in the region of Puebla to the children of blacks and Indians. "In the 17th and 18th centuries to say mulatto or chino was the same (...) By the 19th century the name *chinaco* was given to the famous guerrilla fighters that fought against the French invasion" (Aguirre Beltrán 179). A good description of these Afro-Mestizo men and women can be found in Manuel Payno's *Los bandidos de Río Frío*. Moreover, in today's Mexico "*pelo chino*" designates curly hair.

⁶⁴ *Jarabe* has various meanings; here it describes a dance typical of many Hispanic American countries and of Mexico as well. One of the most typical Mexican *jarabes* today is the *jarabe tapatío*. But it is also important to consider other meanings of the word because in a *fandango* double and triple meanings apply. *Jarabe* is a sweet drink made from cooked sugar and fruit, or cooked sugar and plant, or herbal juices that may be used, given the case, as a refreshing or medicinal drink. A good fiesta, or a good song, or a good dance can be "refreshing" or "medicinal" as well as allowing the release of tensions. *Jarabe de pico* refers to a bunch of small talk. To give *jarabe* means to sweeten up a person.

roll),⁶⁵ rumba, salsa, samba, *sandunga*, *socabón*, *son*, tango,⁶⁶ to mention a few - is also commonly seen as intrinsic to Mexican-ness.

Many of the colonial dances cited by Melgoza had been mentioned in Pablo González Casanova's *Literatura perseguida en la crisis de la Colonia* (*Persecuted Literature During the Colony's Crisis*) as early as 1958.

Unfortunately, González Casanova's historical essay focuses away from the Afro roots of the music and songs mentioned. However, the essay "Afrocuban: Music to Salsa" by Olavo Alén Rodríguez, and the collection of essays *Afrodescendientes: Sobre piel canela* (*Afro-descendants: About Cinnamon Color Skin*) by Alvaro Ochoa Serrano shed light on the unquestionable importance of the black African component of Mexican popular music forms.

Juan Rejano, in *La esfinge mestiza* (*The Mestizo Sphinx*), after describing his short visit to Yanga⁶⁷ and San Juan de la Punta (two Mexican towns in the

⁶⁵ See Thomas Walker's "Hendrix in Black and White;" and *Mr. Rock and Roll: The Allan Freed Story*.

⁶⁶ Marvin Lewis in his *Afro-Argentine Discourse: Another Dimension of the Black Diaspora* cites: *El tema del tango en la literatura argentina* by Tomás Lara, Inés Leonilda and Ronetti de Panti; *Buenos Aires, negros y tango* by Oscar Natale; *La historia del tango: sus orígenes* by Manuel Pampin; and *La música y danza de los negros en el Buenos Aires de los siglos XVIII y XIX* by Ricardo Rodríguez Molas. Another interesting source is *El tango afrocubano, el tango andaluz, el tango criollo* by Norberto A. Bevilacqua. Also in "A brief history of the tango" it is acknowledged that "Today it is generally accepted that the *Tango* borrowed from many nations. It took the relentless African slave rhythm..." (Pfeffer 1).

⁶⁷ Yanga, during the late sixteen and early seventeen century was the "leader of a group of maroon, or run away slaves...in [Veracruz,] Mexico... [His group] became the only group of blacks in colonial Mexico to secure their freedom through rebellion and to have that freedom guaranteed by law..." (*Africana* 2034).

Gulf of Mexico state of Veracruz in the seventies where there are a large number of visibly black mestizos) said that Mexicans have rhythm and know how to sing⁶⁸ (62-64). Rejano refers to many Mexican dances and songs but gives no credit to the "spice" and "flavor" derived from their African component, one of the principal roots of the rhythm of the people and the songs and dances he is writing about. This is not surprising if one considers that there have been few references to the topic since Mexicans have systematically avoided acknowledging their black African heritage.

The methodical practice of omitting the African legacy from Mexican-ness has resulted in an improper narration of identity,⁶⁹ or at best it has developed a partial image of the nation. This can be seen in the light of these national songs and dances as part of a performed cultural narrative or "*etnotextos*" (ethnic texts) as Hugo Niño has identified performed literature. It may be appropriate to make a small parenthesis at this juncture to explain the meaning of "ethnic text." In referring to the means of expression and of communication of the subjugated,

⁶⁸ It must be noted that in Mexico music and dancers without rhythm are referred to as "sin sabor" (without spice); that "Cuban music to be really good must have *sandunga*, a word combination probably made from "salt in Andalusian...and ndungdu, black African pepper" (Alén 9); and that in Venezuela the *contradanza*, besides referring to the French square dance, signifies a well-seasoned plate of black beans and white rice.

⁶⁹ Edward Said, in his introduction to *Culture and Imperialism*, points out that "stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history.... The power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging, is very important to culture and imperialism, and constitutes one of the main connections between them" (Said xii-xiii). Said's words echo Jackson's differentiating between *positive* and *negative mestizaje* referred to before.

Niño points out the existence of a dynamic means for the sharing of culture among the vanquished whose:

aesthetic is not exclusively verbal but total... It has a stylistics that passes through the verbal phase, but it really forms in its performance and in its capacity to process concepts. There is not only a style in the text: the final stylistic result of each one of the texts depends on the acting of the narrator, guided by the reception of the audience. In that moment the style of the text narrated is constituted and its efficacy and the authority of the narrator are recognized, not that of the text, since this depends on the community itself. (113-114)

Clarifying this problem is of utmost importance in order to be able to perceive from an Afro-Hispanic-American perspective the Mexican songs and dances mentioned "with their connotation of ample popular participation" (Pérez Montfort 16); for while they belong to all Mexicans alike, they have African roots as well as other roots.

José Vasconcelos, known as "The Educator of Mexico" and "The Teacher of Latin American Youth," erroneously believed and professed through *La raza* that certain "famous pseudo-native dances," the *Gato* and *Bomba* that he had heard in Yucatan, were "truly Spanish" (185). These dances are not Spanish; in fact they are Afro-Caribbean in origin. Paradoxically, his description of these dances is nevertheless helpful to the task here:

[they] are collective dances in which the dance is suddenly

interrupted so that a dance couple (while the rest laugh in wonderment) can tell one another amorous complements in jest and in verse, the *Bomba*, before continuing to dance. The enchantment of the dancers in motion, the voluptuous joy of the melodies, everything combines to produce a strong emotion of triumphant beauty. Someday this sensual, but vigorous and pure art form, will go back from the rural areas to the cities to correct the sterile artifice, the degraded and poor lasciviousness of urban customs. (Vasconcelos 185)

Pablo González Casanova dedicates a full chapter to the "forbidden songs and dances" that he identifies as the foundations of the Mexican popular satire (82). He takes us back to the end of the 18th century and through an extensive analysis of documents from the Spanish Inquisition he reports on the persecution of the songs and dances with which "blacks and mulattos, soldiers, sailors and the *broza* [lowest classes] relax" (65). He mentions the *Chuchumbé*, and other *sones* such as: *La maturranga*; *Pan de manteca*; *Toro Nuevo*, *Toro viejo*; *El jarabe Gatuno*; *El Saranguandingo*; *Pan de jarabe*; *La cosecha*; and *Mambrú*. He interprets them as expressions that mock religion and death (65). These expressions were coined as "infernal" by the Inquisition, society's censor then, and were a type of song and dance that "plagued" the Colony reaching the high and the lowlands outside of Veracruz: Puebla, Celaya, Querétaro, Pachuca, Pénjamo, Valladolid, and Salamanca. Though incapable of giving full credit where due, González Casanova explains that the *Sacamandú* was brought to

Veracruz by a black man from Havana (69) and that these creations:

From the happy unconscious, from the natural mayhem, from the naive provocation with which the authors of the first profane songs and dances work, develops a challenging consciousness, a sought mayhem, a malicious provocation, hidden behind the anonymous roles and turn into a true satire. (82)

Ricardo Pérez Montfort complements González Casanova's incomplete perspective thirty-six years later. Perez Montfort, after discussing the Mandingo origins of the word fandango (the Mexican fiesta where the songs and dances referred to are acted out or performed), explains how "the fandangos and in particular the dance of the *jarabe*, acquired a connotation of protest, but also of identification: of that which is characteristic of one's own" (22).

During the Mexican Independence movement, the insurgents would insist on the performance of *casta* protest songs and dances in their fiestas: if they were popular already "it was in independent Mexico that they acquired an irrefutable card of nationality" (Pérez Montfort 22).⁷⁰ Melgoza mentions that General Vicente Guerrero, a caudillo from the war of Independence and a president of Mexico from 1829 to 1830, "would be exposed publicly as a gambler and a ladies man for attending with enthusiastic regularity" the fandangos (24). This should not be shocking if Mexican official history had not been forgetful of

⁷⁰ It may be appropriate to mention here that it is widely documented that besides full contingents of Afro-Mexican warriors at least two of the greatest leaders of the movement, José María Morelos y Pavón (Aguirre Beltrán 165) and Vicente Guerrero (Vincent 7), were Afro-Mexicans themselves.

Guerrero's Afro-Mexican origins (Vincent 7).

"From the Gulf coast to the hot lands of the west, in the Bajío and in various states of the south, the fandangos gave free rein to popular creativity," they became the characteristic Mexican festive manifestation (Pérez Montfort 23). The same author explains that in independent Mexico these lyrics, dances and *sones* would be "executed freely" and thus they would become traits of the national identity and in time they would generate the picture, mentioned before, that would determine a classic image of the Mexican nationality "the *chinaco* and the china dancing the *jarabe*" (23).

Alvaro Ochoa Serrano in 1997 describes the fandango and explains its origins and development in light of the African diaspora (129-141). Ochoa seeks to clarify that the fandango is a black *bailongo* (a gathering to eat, drink, and dance) adopted by whites and *descoloridos* (bleached out or mixed people). He explains that Rolando A. Pérez Hernández recently has established the "Bantu, African linguistic and cultural origins of the fandango and its association with chaos"⁷¹ (129). Ochoa relates how the fandango, after being appropriated by the high spheres of the Spanish urban population, came and went between Africa, America and Europe during the "trafficking and transit" period. He states that the fandango "acquired a very particular twist in the Iberian Peninsula" and explains

⁷¹ Pérez Montfort explains that according to the *Diccionario de autoridades* "[fandango] is a dance introduced in Spain by those who have been to the kingdoms of the Indies" probably at the end of the 17th century, and says that the same reference points out a possible Mandingo etymology of *fanda* "get-together" or "feed" and the pejorative *ango*. "Thus fandango would be a 'fiesta where one eats', 'Fiesta to get together and enjoy' " (20).

that “the fandango in plays and music—ballet-pantomime, comedy, sainetes, sonatas—would be recognized then as typically Iberian and with such a trade mark would travel parts of Europe and North America” (130).

The fandango in Mexico was a kind of celebration, “an experience, a variety show” that found various open or closed spaces in the populous concentrations: “inns, eateries, patios and arcades.” The fandango propagated itself in rural and urban areas alike. It created a stage “to solve differences, to manifest anger, to compete, to satisfy [the body and soul] and to enjoy [a moment of freedom];” it would take place “any day of the week, preferably Saturday, Sunday and holidays” from the 17th until the 20th century (Ochoa 134).

Ochoa also takes us to Veracruz—the port of entry for most of the people and cultures that came to Mexico during the colonial period—and relates a complaint made that “in the narrow street called *La Campana* a couple, a man and a woman and another couple had gone out to dance the *Pan de manteca* dance. Besides this occurrence in Veracruz, Ochoa as well cites the report to the Inquisition from someone offended because in The *Plazuela* of *Santo Domingo* there was a fandango where “a contredanse was danced, women and men embracing and making lascivious movements.” Here, Ochoa mentions as well a legal process reported in the Spanish Inquisition’s archives instituted against the mulatto “Pablo José Loza, an artisan, for having sung and uttered stanzas and heretical sayings in a fandango, in the middle of the plaza, in the arcade of Villa de León” (134).

In fandangos, people would sing and dance to “a musical tradition” called

son (González-El 182). This musical tradition, according to Olavo Alén Rodríguez, "is, in fact, one of the musical styles or genres that may be considered genuinely Cuban from very early times, but never before the second half of the 18th century" (61). He states that, "The *son* lyrics became a mixture of the African way of expressing concepts—very complex images expressed in few words—and the meticulous descriptive style that the Spanish cultural heritage contributed to the popular speech of the Cuban population" (69).⁷²

It is this tradition that constitutes the foundations of *jarocho* and *mariachi* song and dance. To trace its arrival in Mexico, Alén cites Argeliers León: "The expansion of the *son* complex throughout its area of origin was helped along by the intense coastal trade that existed between Cartagena and Yucatán, and between the ports of southern Cuba—including the Isle of Pines—and Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic" (63). In addition, from the onset of the 17th century the area that is Mexico today engaged in trade with "Peru, Guatemala, Puerto Rico and Havana" (Reynoso 29). The *son* is an Afro-Cuban tradition that spread throughout the Spanish colonies in America. The *son* may have entered Mexico through Yucatan and Veracruz just as the aforementioned "*Sacamandú* [that] was brought to Veracruz by a black man from Havana..." (González

⁷² Professor Derek Carr, who specializes in Medieval and Golden Age Spanish Literature, mentioned the existence of the voice "*son*" prior to the time referred to here. He mentioned a voice *son* that comes from the Latin *sonus* "sound." The origins of the voice *son* as understood here are unknown to us, however it should be mentioned that there is a particularly curious relation between the word "*songa*" (irony, mockery) found in the Spanish dictionary and the way the *son* referred to here was used by non-whites to act out grievances and challenges to persons and the establishment itself.

Casanova 69). The *son* in Mexico was "first officially mentioned in 1766 'when inquisition authorities condemned a *son* named the *Chuchumbé* on immoral and anticlerical grounds' " (González-El 182; and González Casanova 65).

The *son jarocho* is widely acknowledged as a folkloric musical genre representative of Veracruz and of Mexico:

[It] developed from unique syncretistic performance styles common to field workers of Indian and African ancestry. Its acceptance by national cultural institutions as a mestizo art form is a post-Revolutionary phenomenon. During the colonial period *jarocho* dancing was associated with largely autonomous populations that lived in the coastal region of [Veracruz] and specifically with African and Native American slaves.... *jarocho* dancing, particularly during the colonial period was one of the expressive forums for the articulation of African cultural consciousness. (González-El Hilali 180)

González Casanova, referring to the above mentioned *Chuchumbé son* of 1766, says that the music of this dance, whose melodies and rhythms "indubitably belong to the Caribbean family,"⁷³ has not been preserved and that "only the stanzas, sung by the spectators while the others danced, are left" (65). Of

⁷³ It would appear that he is referring to the music derived from West African music that became Afro-Antillean or Afro-Caribbean music and then after its arrival on the continental land became Afro-Amerindian-Hispanic music. It must be stressed that there was interchange and exchange and that the Americas influenced Africa, Asia and Europe, as may be the case with flamenco dance (Sevilla 4).

course, it must be remembered that, these dances in their new environment absorbed other elements giving birth to the hybrid son jarocho sung by *jarocho* musicians and the *son ranchero* sung by *mariachi* bands, in other words, Mexican mestizo music. González Casanova further explains the *Chuchumbé son*:

These stanzas could be one of many isolated manifestations of religious profanity, if from their birth there had not been other similar tendencies and if the edict with which they were prohibited had not been applied to the persecution of the multiple profane dances and songs that emerged at that time. (65)

González Casanova points out that they are unique “because they represent some of the most daring contempt of religion and death, and because they never abandon the delight of evoking sexual passes, with few exceptions, related to sacred things.” González Casanova emphasizes that the said stanzas:

Integrated into the brutality of the movements, the irreverent fantasy of the costumes, to the devilish climate created by the music and screams, they seem to have formed a whole destined to break the harmony of sacred music, or of pious dances and songs. (65)

The following description by Manuel Payno in his *Crónicas de viaje* (*Travel Chronicles*), on a trip to Veracruz in the winter of 1843, under the subtitle *El coloquio, el lépero, la china* offers further support to the above reference. Payno describes what he calls a “colloquy” that, according to him, took place in the

*palenque*⁷⁴ of Puebla. "A representation of the life of the Virgin, from the time she marries Saint Joseph until the birth of Christ in Bethlehem." An activity he was informed of by "a great poster depicting devils throwing flames and other analogous figures" posted at the entrance to the arcade in the central plaza. Payno sees the audience, women and men, as "a bronzed group of severe and very rare physiognomies [of whom the majority are] two social oddities... the *lépero* and the *china*." He says that instead of watching the play he is having a better time watching a group of people "eating raw eggs with salt and drinking huge swigs of *aguardiente* spirits while making comments on the representation and saying some crude adages." These skits, for Payno, are a ridiculous parody of the story. According to him there is violence acted, and the public roars with laughter at the insults, obscenity and foolish remarks about the "most poetic and tender part of the Catholic religion." He recalls nostalgically Calderón's *Autos sacramentales* and a different reception to the theme. Payno sees the play before him as highly immoral because "their only contribution is to ridicule the religious beliefs and to awaken singular doubts about the truths of dogma." The performance ends with *jarabe* and *palomo* dances" (73-77).

Jarocho sones as well as *mariachi* sones are performed in fandangos.

They are both based on a *zapateado* or *zapateo* (rhythmic footwork)⁷⁵ performed

⁷⁴ In Mexico a *palenque* is a place where the lower classes gathered to see cock fights, to have festivals or, as in the case here, to see a profane performance. It may be interesting to note also that *palenque* is the name given in Colombia to maroon (runaway slaves) villages such as *El Palenque de San Basilio*.

⁷⁵ Very likely a relative of the Afro-Euro-American Tap Dance: an "art form indigenous to the United States that combines African and European dance with

on a *tarima* (a wooden stage) in the open or in closed areas as in the case of the *mariachi*. "By definition, a *son* must be of 4/6 time, have an unlimited number of verses (each one of which is a complete thought unto itself), and be played for dancing." The *jarocho son*, however, has 4/6 and 4/4 time (Carragher 1). Hugh Thomas, reporting on the *bailes de tambor* (drum dances) in Cuba's sugar and coffee plantations of the mid nineteenth century, states, "in the country the most customary dance was the *zapateo*, danced to the harp or guitar, but sung by all present too" (147). Moreover, according to Thomas, Fernando Ortiz points out:

[...] the importance in Cuba too of Negro literary tournaments, entertainments rather than admittedly religious, long collective literary improvisations on specific themes, directed perhaps against some institution or person who had committed an offence against the Negro way of life. From these entertainments developed some of the specifically entertaining, that is, non-religious dances, such as the *rumba*....(521)

Other Afro-Hispanic-American forms of the *son* such as the Peruvian *zapateo* (Perú: Música Negra) show similarities that indicate related origins, but one important characteristic of the Mexican version of the *son* (with its regional varieties) is the use of a *tarima*:

Though most people don't realize it, the *tarima* is another essential instrument. A *tarima* is a platform about a foot high, approximately the size of a piece of plywood and usually made of cedar planks.

complicated jazz-based percussive sensibility created by elaborate foot work"
(*Africana* 1826)

This is where the dancers pound out the rhythms, interacting with the musicians, sometimes following and sometimes dictating the direction of the music (...) the belief is that for the slaves, who were deprived of their drums, the *tarima* was the replacement. (Carraher 2)

In support of the above, Ochoa, referring to the fandango, or *mariachi* in Michoacan, describes "a tarima placed on a water well to render the sound of a drum" (148).

Ochoa also explains how the fandango evolved into the *mariaches* (today's *mariachis*) and how it spread throughout the west, central Mexico and beyond the border "encouraged by the State and monopolized by those who controlled show business" (157). He emphasizes:

In central and western Mexican lands, in a certain way, with a more or less African relationship, each land would give the fandango a singular touch that, given the opportunities and possibilities, embraced a universe of space, time, people, equine and other live stock, music, song, food, drink and gambling. (133)

Outside of Veracruz the *jarocho son* acquired other rhythms and gave birth to the *mariachi*. In addition to the lascivious *zapateado* and satirical lyrics, the Veracruz experience exported forms of cooking and speech that in time would interweave and become today's Mexican-ness. Reality persisted despite monumental government efforts (instituted during the cultural phase of the Revolution) to "bleach out" the black African presence from the picture.

Afro-Mexico could and can be observed in Mexican mestizo popular cultures: "While *La Bamba* is the most famous of the *sones jarocho*s, there are somewhere around 100 others" (Carragher 1). A popular *mariachi son* is *El son de la negra* (The Black Woman's Son), *La Sandunga* is very popular as well. In Nayarit, the *jarabe* is formed by the *sones El Coamecate, El Diablo, Los Bules* and *Los Negritos*. These *sones* are called *potorricos*⁷⁶ "a dance where the man shows off his ability with the machete or with the knife" (Andrade 2).

Afro-Mexican music, as its name implies, is a mestizo music generated by various previous cultural amalgamations. It is a hybrid of African, Amerindian, European and other roots. What is certain is that the Mexican *son* is as African as Amerindian and Spanish, and that up to today this fact has been deliberately ignored and even forgotten notwithstanding its rhythm, melody and harmony, characteristics that reveal to the common listener that Mexican mestizo music goes beyond the Amerindian and Spanish roots that have been officially acknowledged as the only roots to Mexican *mestizaje*.

Therefore, it must be emphasized that the West African influence in the music of the Americas can be seen and felt in Mexico's *jarocho* and *mariachi sones*. These musical traditions that engendered two of the most popular impressions of Mexican-ness: the *jarocho* dancers, and the *chinaco* and the *china*, are varieties of the Cuban *son*. The *son* complex spread all over the

⁷⁶ Obviously a corruption of "puertorricos" meaning from Puerto Rico: in the area of Michoacan, Colima and Nayarit there is a dance called *La danza de los viejitos* (The Little Old Men Dance) where people are dressed, mask and all, in the same manner as *Los Viejos* (The Old Men) in Puerto Rico's Afro-Boricua Festival of *Santiago Apostol* in Loíza (Cepeda 15).

continent and was an element in much of the development of music. It may even have traveled back to Africa and Europe. Flamenco historians now accept the Afro-American influence upon their dance (Sevilla 4), and anyone listening to the late Nigerian musician Fella Kuti can discover a bit of salsa flavoring his music.

A fiesta, fandango or *mariachi* without food is unthinkable. Just as in the case of music, song and dance, Mexican culinary arts are the result of a complex amalgamation of *mestizajes*. Many of the foodstuffs and culinary techniques of today's Mexican cuisine came from other regions of the planet via the Spanish invasion. According to the *Cambridge World History of Food*, "In 1493 Columbus introduced horses, cattle, pigs, goats, and sheep to the New World." Also, according to the same source, "the gardens and orchards became much more diverse..." as a result of the encounter. The colonists brought cabbage, onions, carrots, lettuce, radishes, garlic, chickpeas, limes, lemons and sour oranges among others (Kiple 1279). But this complexity is not enough to handicap the senses and impair the perception of the African flavor and "know how" present along with the Amerindian and European components in national dishes such as *menudo* stew, famous in and out of Mexico.

Menudo is a derivative of the *mondongo* eaten all over the Americas, Spain and Portugal. By definition, *mondongo* refers to the innards of the animals.

Some African-Americans have a dish called "chitterlings" that is made with *mondongo* cooked in pinto beans with onion, garlic and spices. Argentinians cook *mondongo* with white corn, navy beans, chorizo, bacon and *zapallo criollo*

(a type of squash) and call it *Locro Tucumano*. In Peru it is said, "African slaves introduced the eating of animal entrails, as their owners didn't eat them. They invented *mondonguito*...." (Peruvian 1). In Venezuela, Colombia and Panama *mondongo* is well known. In Costa Rica, at Limon's Carnival one can find *sopa de mondongo* (*La Nación* 1). Nicaragua's *mondongo* is a national dish advertised to attract tourists. Dominicans, Puerto Ricans and Haitians cook *mondongo* for many of their celebrations. In Yucatan, Mexico, there is a dish called *mondongo Kabic* (a dish said to have been introduced by Arabs) (Museos 2).

The US Department of Health and Human services refers to *mondongo* stew in the "Afro-Hispanic" section of a study titled "Hispanics in the United States: An Insight into Group Characteristics." According to this study, "Spanish Caribbean was heavily affected by African grammatical patterns and loan words." *Mondongo* is identified as one of the "loan words" (Rodríguez 10).

All of this reveals a pattern: *mondongo* can be associated with the presence of black Africans. According to *Ethnologue*, in Zaire there is a village called *Mondongo* (Zaire 2). Aguirre Beltrán cites that the tribe *Mondonga* is "well known in Mexico and in other places of the Americas such as Haiti and the Danish island in the Antilles." He says that these people, among others, entered New Spain under the general name of "blacks from the Congo" (Aguirre 141).

Mexican *menudo* and *pancita* varieties are descendants of southern Mexico's *mondongo*. *Menudo* refers to the beef entrails, although today the dish is generally cooked with beef tripe and hoofs only, hominy corn, peppers, garlic,

and served with chopped onions, dry oregano and a wedge of lime (in some recipes tomatoes are used). Mexican *mondongo* is cooked with tripe including the part called fan and the *coágulo* (a dark inside stomach chamber), while *menudo* is usually cooked with *callo* (the outer part of the stomach) only; *mondongo* is cooked with *achiote* (annatto), tomatoes, onion, garlic, orange juice, and *epazote* (a Mexican herb). In central Mexico there are varieties of *mondongo* that are simply called *pancita* (small stomach).

Menudo stew is another recognized national stamp of Mexican-ness. It can be found as far as California, Chicago and New York and is associated with *mariachis* and with places where one would likely hear the word *chingar*. Is this association the result of the mass media image of the Mexican exported in the post-Revolution era, or is it the natural result of the cultural *mestizaje* whose roots are explored here? Either way, *menudo* is an internationally known Mexican dish that can be considered to have, among others, Afro roots like the famous speech of the people of Alvarado, Veracruz.

The people from Veracruz are nationally known for their *jarocho* celebrations. "Alvarado is one of the two towns (the other is Tlacotalpan), that have historically competed for recognition as the 'authentic' home of the *jarocho*" (González-El 173). Alvarado people are also nationally famous as *malhablados* (foulmouthed). They are known as the ones who most frequently use the verb *chingar*, and its derivatives, and in the most creative fashion. To hear two *Alvaradeños* arguing is to be in the presence of a living piece of the history of the *mestizaje* that Castilian underwent in Mexico, at least in part, due to the African

diaspora's influence.

Octavio Paz, in his well-known essay "La Malinche," a part of *El laberinto de la soledad*, explains that the word *chingar* is "a word heard only among men or in great parties" (70). Paz places it among the foul words, which he calls "the only living language in a world of anemic voices" (67). He sees it as a word in which an important part of the Mexican character is expressed, and explains its meaning in the light of the Conquest (77). For Paz, *chingar* is a word that speaks of Mexican history, a word that comes from the innermost part of Mexican-ness. *Chingar*, in its varied forms, relates the rape, pillage and plunder that took place in the Americas and Africa during the Spanish enterprise. *Chingar* is at the center of the occurrence; it brings back from memory, in a manner of speaking, the image of subjugated women being taken by force. The word then, from *chingar* becomes *la chingada*, the raped woman of abject passivity who "offers no resistance to the violence..." perpetrated upon her (77). *La chingada*, for Paz, is also a metaphor for the subjugated nation. The conqueror becomes *El chingón*, the paternal figure of a supposed success, the mythical image of a warped greatness, the sick model to be emulated, prized and respected by all under him, including his bastard sons and daughters *los hijos de la chingada*. They were literally the sons and daughters of the raped one: the *pelados*, *léperos*, *chinacos*, *teporochos*, *nacos*, *pitos*...the *mezclas* that by the end of the 18th century were the majority of the population in what was to become Mexico. The *hijos de la chingada*, the mestizos and the *mezclas* all are one, and this character's interior and exterior make-up includes the African element.

Paz correctly states, "[t]he character of the Mexicans is the product of the social circumstances prevailing in our country [and that] the history of Mexico, which is the history of those circumstances, contains the answer to all questions" (64). However, Paz's perspective on the Mexican character lacks a crucial element: the black African participation, or the Afro roots intrinsic to the character he analyzes.

In "*El verbo chingar: una palabra clave*" (The verb *chingar*: a key word) Rolando Antonio Pérez Hernández⁷⁷ tracks the African legacy of the word. Contrary to all previous affirmations about the roots of the word *chingar*, including that of Octavio Paz in *El laberinto*, he finds that *chingar* is of Kimbundu origin, a language of the Bantu family. According to him, *chingar* is a word bequeathed by Angolan slaves (307) whose presence and influence in Mexico as well as in all of the Americas is well established (Aguirre Beltrán 139, 141). Pérez Hernández' theory traces the word even in Brazil. He gives as an explanation for his finding "the great influence Kimbundu has had in Brazilian Portuguese" given the previous close relations between Angola and Brazil (318).

In the Mexican context, such a theory becomes the more plausible when considering that the location of colonial *obrajes* (textile industry slave shops) were legally restricted to Puebla, Michoacan, Guanajuato, Queretaro, Tlaxcala, Oaxaca and Mexico; that in the 17th century a good number of black slaves labored in that industry (Reynoso 23); and that there was continuous commercial contact with other parts of the Colony where the word *chingar*, or a derivative, is

⁷⁷ This name appeared thus in the citation; however I have learned that his maternal last name is Fernández instead of Hernández.

present.

The word *chingar* may be traced from Veracruz to practically all of Mexico and the Americas where the black African presence is an integral part of the making of nations and identities in addition to being an historical fact. *Chingar* can be found in the company of the fandango or "great parties," where the foul word called poetry by Paz, may be heard.

Moreover, according to the *Atlas cultural de México*, Mexican Spanish is a super-dialect divided into other dialects. These include the *altiplano meridional* dialect spoken in parts of Michoacan, parts of Guerrero, parts of Oaxaca and Morelos, Mexico City, the state of Mexico, parts of Tlaxcala, parts of Puebla and parts of Hidalgo (Atlas 167); and the word *chingar* is a major piece of the cultural heritage reflected by this dialect.

The *jarocho son*, the *mariachi*, the fandango, the *menudo* stew, and the voice *chingar*, are all national impressions, or badges, of Mexican mestizo cultural identity. They all have black African roots at the point of origin along with the Amerindian, Spanish, and other roots.

Chapter Three

La vida inútil de Pito Pérez:

Tracking the Afro Contribution to the Mexican Picaresque Sense of Humor

We are dealing with an important sector of Mexican anonymous society whose African ancestors arrived on request through a black and controlled market. Heirs who, ripped from their cherished and hardly known far-off mother, somehow stamped a deep imprint in the lineage and culture of the Mexican West, in Jal-Mich and in the North-West of the same Michoacan entity.

Alvaro Ochoa Serrano

Blacks may lose their form, but they never lose their essence.

Rafael Murillo-Selva Rendón⁷⁸

As seen in the two prior chapters, history can attest that Mexican biological and cultural amalgamation results from the mixing of people from all corners of the world. The three main branches of Mexican *mestizaje* principally come from pre-Columbian American indigenous peoples, peoples from a four hundred kilometer strip of Western black Africa, and from the no less diverse and colorful Spaniards,⁷⁹ among other ethnicities. Today, the black African element of Mexican *mestizaje* has begun to be recognized, although it is often denied or generally unknown in Mexico and abroad. As mentioned in Chapter One, until recently the official version had stated that Mexican *mestizaje* resulted from the exclusive "racial" mix between Spaniards and Amerindians.

⁷⁸ Quoted from an interview of Rafael Murillo-Selva Rendón by Columbia Truque Vélez (Truque 36).

⁷⁹ It must be remembered that Spanish people in Europe commonly are considered "southerners" and more in line with Eastern Europeans, but not as "pure" and "advanced" as Nordic peoples.

Such discourse has changed, at least at the intellectual level. Today, it is accepted that Mexico's *mestizaje* has a black African root. One of the problems with such acceptance is that while an Afro historical legacy is acknowledged, it still seems to be understood as a thing of the past and viewed exclusively from a Euro-centric point of view. One of the reasons given is that as far as Mexican "culture" is concerned what has been written is in Spanish. This is like saying that all music played on a guitar is Arabic because the instrument is originally Arabic. Language has been no more than an instrument for expressing experiences and the feelings born from them. The Afro element of the mestizo, beyond being a legacy, is a presence as well. The Afro-ness (brought by the black ancestors) that literally blossomed in the new environment is integral to Mexican-ness: it is imbedded in the rhythm of the sonos and in the new musicality of Spanish brought by words such as *chingar*. In other words, without the Afro root considered as one of the living Mexican roots no one can speak sensibly about Mexican-ness today.

Mexico's Afro roots can be verified through the senses: they can be seen, heard, touched, and savored. Wherever one goes in Mexico and where Mexican mestizos are, characteristics that manifest Africa's active participation in the construction of the modern nation are obvious. In other words, in today's popular Mexico, one can appreciate the indelible physical and cultural brand of the Afro (stronger than the Spanish hot iron that branded slaves, and stronger than the *criollo* myths that stigmatize blackness and negate the pervasive black legacy) that pierced its way to the very soul of the country. This is confirmed by the

worldview, food, music, language, and sense of humor of the so long denied and beaten *mezclas* or mestizos who are the majority of Mexicans today.

La vida inútil de Pito Pérez (1938) by José Rubén Romero (1890-1952), from this perspective acquires an additional dimension, particularly when considering the origins of the Mexican rogue, *mezcla*, *lépero*, or *pícaro* which will be sketched following a brief revisiting of the critical approach informing this study, and the introduction of the novel's structure, plot and genre.

La vida inútil is a staunch critique of the government, its institutions, the clergy, and the *criollo* elite. It is a mockery and condemnation of common people, who according to the central character, Pito Pérez,⁸⁰ remain enslaved by their beliefs and inertia (183). *La vida* is a testament of contempt toward a destiny that allows Mexican Pito Pérezes to develop nothing else but a warped sense of love, a total desire—plagued with eroticism—for death itself. However, and beyond this, the novel, although in a hard-to-perceive fashion, is informed by a white aesthetic.

Richard L. Jackson has found that black phobia and a white aesthetic pervades a considerable part of Latin American literature that refers to blacks and their descendants. Beauty, morality, civility, gallantry, bravery, prowess, industriousness, restraint, sincerity, intellectuality, good-heartedness, and love-for-life, among other virtues, are measured according to the amount of whiteness a person appears to have; in short, the closer to white the better. This worldview repeats and reinforces stereotypes of non-white people. But more importantly,

⁸⁰ Pito in the *lépero* dialect means penis. Pérez is an extremely common name.

once it is placed in the channels of persuasion and reaches the masses it develops into codes that actually warp the national memory and the perception of self.

La vida inútil, according to the central character and narrator, Pito Pérez, is a mind twister, a psychoanalytical novel (125). It is a novel wherein the reader is introduced to the psychology of a drunkard⁸¹ who observes the situation of his time and place, the first decades of 20th-century Mexico while the modern nation is being born.

What happened after the civil war called the Mexican Revolution? What happened to the institutions? What happened to the masses? Who made up the masses? What was life like in Michoacan (the setting of Pito's story) during the first four decades of the century? How did people feel in general? What did they eat? What else had been achieved beyond the killing of a tenth (about a million) of the national population, the majority of which were non-white people? On what basis was the modern nation being narrated?

It may be clear that a complete response to these questions is beyond the parameters of this chapter. Nevertheless, a reading inclusive of a partial reply to the problem is feasible, particularly in the light of Brushwood's work:

The novel is capable of expressing the reality of a nation given its ability to cover both visible reality and the elements that are not

⁸¹ The thesis of the drunkard-*pelado* here echoes the Mexican *pelado* thesis advanced a few years before by Samuel Ramos in *El perfil del hombre y la cultura de México* (*The Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico*) (1934)—where the *pelado* or *lépero* is a pathetic and worthless being, an extra load impeding modernization.

seen. In its pinnacle the novel explores internal reality, which is a deeper part of the existing circumstance and also the dreams that transcend what is visible in a different direction. It is capable of inquiring in both directions about the visible circumstances without toning down its conscience or the reader's conscience.

(Preface ix)

La vida inútil was first published in 1938. It has been made into black and white and color films; it has been adapted for the theater and performed a number of times. It was translated into English in 1966. It has been taught in many United States universities since that time and made into video documentaries. Articles and criticism on the novel exist by the dozen in prestigious publications. Five thousand copies of the seventeenth Spanish language edition of the novel appeared in 1970. By 1995 it had been printed thirty-six times. The thirty-sixth edition, the edition used here, was of ten thousand copies. The novel has 232 pages divided into three sections. The first two sections are numbered I, and II and the third section is titled "Some of Pito Perez's things left in the inkwell." The first part is divided into eight chapters without number, each of which is an anecdote of Pito's non-love affairs. The second part is divided into four additional chapters without number as well, where other circumstances of Pito's existence are narrated. The third and last section, written as a post-statement, is divided into five numbered chapters.

The first part of the novel, referring to something that happened before 1910 when the armed phase of the Mexican Revolution started, is a series of stories

about Pito's life and his contacts with people. They are tales from memory painted on bucolic landscapes; roguish tales told by a drunkard from the bell tower of his native town's church. They are ghoulish anecdotes told to the narrator, Pito's neighbor, and a poet in the making. This is done right before Pito abruptly abandons Santa Clara del Cobre (38).

This first section informs us about the sharp perception Pito has of life, notwithstanding, or perhaps due to, his excessive suffering (12). The reader learns about his preferences for autochthonous products: food (13), people (21), and for national drinks (21). The reader becomes aware of Pito's love for truth and his hatred for privileged *castas* (15) and of "the compendium of a whole social world, crammed with injustice and inequality" (15), a world where the people in control prefer what is European (21). Pito sketches the state of a few institutions before 1910 when the armed conflict began. He narrates his childhood and analyzes the circumstances that made him appear as a true madman (16) and which isolated him socially, such as a paradoxical "theft" of the church's moneybox while he was an altar boy (26-34).

The second part of the novel is formed by another series of anecdotes about Pito's life. The narrator runs into Pito by chance in Morelia, the capital city of Michoacan ten years later (after 1920 when the armed phase of the revolution had officially ended). This part of the narrative describes a crude social reality that would seem more like fiction (169). Pito is underemployed, selling odds and ends. When the narrator reproaches him for leaving without saying good-bye, Pito replies that he had to go "to keep on living and thus have something to say"

(147). Also, by way of an hallucination suffered by Pito, religious beliefs are challenged, where even in heaven there are social differences due to skin color (173). Then, Pito's romantic affair with death, *la Caneca*, is disclosed (175) and one learns that Pito is found dead "on a heap of trash, his hair messy, and full of mud. His mouth contracted by a bitter grin and his eyes sourly staring toward heaven with a daring look" (181).

In the third part some anecdotes on Pito's life are told after his death. This section is an ode to Pito's unfortunate life and is utilized to finish developing the central character, a *pelado*, *mezcla* or *lépero* prototype, and to describe a time and place under siege by foreign people and their interests. What cannot be said about a dead tramp? The narrator expounds in an elegy:

There are knaves for whom everything turns out fine due to good luck, and unfortunate rogues, such as our friend Jesús Pérez Gaona [Pito's Christian name], who never told a lie and whose word nobody believed in; who never killed even an insect and from whom everyone ran as though running from a murderer; who ingeniously found food yet stayed a beggar; one who searched for the comfort of love and found general contempt and indifference from all women to the point of stating ironically: my hand will be my very widow? (190)

This last part of the novel points out that Pito was never a friend to civil or ecclesiastical authority because both offer punishment in this life as well as in the afterlife, and neither one "offered him a piece of bread" (210).

La vida is a story of the unequal struggle between a man and his circumstance. Pito and society are the main actors. Secondary characters serve as background and come to life only when viewed as community. No one is forged as an individual; rather they are presented as a mass of characteristics.

As a smith forging a piece, the author creates recognizable images out of the anonymous mass. Romero gives form, life, and color to a part of the people erased through the ideology of *mestizaje*. Romero seems to laugh at himself and makes us laugh at ourselves while drinking and making us drink slowly the bitter contents of the calyx of truth, a reality that sip-by-sip burns all the way to the soul. Sparks fly out from his hammer while he makes popular poetry, the very satire coming from the spirit of a people whose unwanted image is not reflected in the nation's mirror; a people capable of laughing to tears, notwithstanding the paradox of "existing" and not seeing themselves reflected, due to a sense of humor developed by forever walking hand in hand with Death itself. A people, former slaves, who as a part of daily life withstood the stench of freely abused flesh; a people who have fought relentlessly an unequal fight, at least to be able to die with dignity. The internal conflict of the Mexican does not come from the conflict between two roots nor from her/his incapacity to reconcile three, it is the result of the incomprehensible human experience she/he has lived.

Without a doubt *La vida inútil de Pito Pérez* echoes the anonymous *La Vida de Lazarillo de Tormes y de sus fortunas y adversidades* (1554) (*Lazarillo de Tormes' Life: his Fortunes and Adversities*), "A book surrounded by mystery that continues to pose three enigmas: author, date it was written, and meaning of

the story" (Aguirre Vélver 13). *La vida de Lazarillo* is considered one of the most important prose works in the Spanish language. It describes the experiences of a rogue who runs into hunger and misery when he engages work as a blind person's guide, as an altar boy, and as a servant to a squire. From here he will develop a scathing view of life and the circumstances surrounding him. *La vida de Lazarillo* describes the society of his day. This novel is considered among one of the first picaresque novels in Spanish.⁸²

La vida inútil is nothing new regarding its genre. Nonetheless, at least two fundamental points make it different from *La vida de Lazarillo*: In *La vida inútil* the author is known, and it introduces a sense of humor that literally possesses new colors.

La vida inútil informs the reader that the author is the narrator (187), and that it is he who judges society due to Pito's death, or unfortunate life, when he expresses, "misery does not breed happiness, and poor people's laughter, when they laugh day in and day out, seems to be a grimace of pain" (189).

The sense of humor reflected in *La vida inútil* is mainly a product of the experience of Amerindian people, of people from black Africa, of "certain Hispanic popular expressions" (Pérez Montfort 17), and the result of the amalgamation of all and every one of them. The sense of humor in *La vida inútil* is far from being a simple Spanish transplant. Hispanic popular culture⁸³ plays

⁸² The other picaresque novel considered among the first in Spanish is *Guzmán de Alfarache: Vida y hechos del pícaro* (1599-1604) by Mateo Alemán.

⁸³ Antonio García de León explains, "Generally, when one mentions the baroque in its various manifestations, one forgets the circularity and interdependence

an instrumental role. However, the sense of humor acquires additional dimensions in the light of the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and the subjugation and enslavement of black, Amerindian, and Asian people among others. Thus, *La vida inútil* makes the author known. It informs the reader that the sense of humor therein is a product of the Mexican experience of which the black experience, so adamantly denied, is nevertheless a major player. This chapter will take this premise as its point of departure.

Pablo González Casanova identifies the first profane dances and songs (*sones, jarabes* etc.) as the roots of Mexican popular satire (82). These songs and dances are singular not only because they were persecuted by the Inquisition, but because "they are the most audacious mockery of religion and death, because they never abandon the delight of evoking sexual passes, and because, saving few occasions, they are related to holy things (González Casanova 65). From within this satire, according to González Casanova, "customs, ceremonies, education, authorities, prayer, death and even God, acquire a new meaning" (87).

As a consequence of the controversy between the anonymous rogues or *pícaros* and the Church, criticism of the system matures during the 18th century and a "vigorous political conscience is acquired" (González Casanova 97). From here a public opinion is born that, beyond addressing personal differences, establishes relations between people and institutions, and institutions and the

existing between popular culture and written academic culture, particularly, in the almost intangible territory of literature and music (García de León 111).

state, to become a public critical stance with a political reach which foreshadows the arrival of the Independence movement in the beginning of the 19th century and that by 1810 will climax with the onset of the political severance of New Spain from Spain.

The independent journalist, José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi (1776-1827), is perhaps the best-known writer of satirical fliers until the late 1820's. As a critic of the political and social environment inherited from the colonial period, he wrote under the pen name *El pensador mexicano* (The Mexican Thinker). He initiated the novelistic tradition in Mexico (and perhaps in Latin America as well). Fernández de Lizardi may have been the first to write an antislavery novel in the New World.⁸⁴

In 1816, Fernández de Lizardi published *El periquillo sarniento* (*The Mangy Parrot*), a work that follows the Spanish picaresque structure. However, *El periquillo* differs as it denounces inhumanity, cruelty, and the irrationality of slavery (726-735). Therefore, it takes the genre to dimensions unknown by its predecessors. Carmen Ruiz Barrionuevo points out "Lizardi took advantage of a picaresque mold inherited from Spanish and Hispanic-American experiences and shaped it to serve his purpose and thereby made it apt for new heights" (Fernandez [Introducción] 40).

The debate continues as to whether *El periquillo* is a picaresque work, implying that if it were picaresque, the work would lack originality. At this

⁸⁴ According to Salvador Bueno in "El negro en *El Periquillo Sarniento*: antirracismo de Lizardi."

junction the same problem is faced by *La vida inútil* written over a hundred years later. A full response is outside the parameters of this chapter. Nevertheless, it can be proposed that both novels are based on a new experience that includes the vision of the vanquished, the black experience, and that both are written for social purposes, or in Ruíz Barrionuevo's words: "to confront pain, errors, and failure" (Fernández 40).

From the perspective of this study, both novels are creative and do not lack originality. In the case of *El periquillo*, the voice is ready to part from colonial ideology. In *La vida inútil*, 19th-century ideology, at least in part, comes under attack. Both authors use Spanish language and picaresque structures as a vehicle, but they adapt it and give it new breath in order to express a reality that, beyond being a Spanish extension, possesses its own dimensions, as will be seen in depth.

Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán discloses that the *mezclas*, "an inter-casta whose situation could not be more miserable" (173), were a mass of beings which, given an inept legislation and an unjust economy, could be found wandering all over the country and the cities, forced to resort to their wits to extract the bare minimum for survival. He points out that the number of drifters, "plebeians in the capital cities, shifters in the haciendas," grew to such an extent, and their lifestyle chipped into New Spain's economy to the point of provoking "slavery's decadence as it turned production based on slave-work unprofitable: the population of *mezclas* had grown to such a considerable size" (173).

Mezclas have been characterized under various derogatory names. They are known as: *léperos*, *pelados*,⁸⁵ *teporochos*, *vagos*, *plebe*, *nacos*, *mugrosos*, among many others. They have received names according to historical need; a good example of this is "*chinaco*." Paradoxically, all of this name-calling is what allows the tracing of the *pícaro*'s lineage and the making of the needed connections to inform this reading further. Manuel Payno, as mentioned in Chapter Two, described a collective character he observed within the city of Puebla during the representation of a profane colloquium in the central *palenque* in 1843. Payno divides the crowd before him into "two social oddities" (75). One comprised of *léperos* and the other composed of "beautiful *chinitas*" (73).

According to Aguirre Beltrán, the name *china* was given in Puebla to the offspring of Amerindians and blacks during the 17th and 18th centuries and by the 19th century "*china*, *lépera* or prostitute connoted the same" thing (179).

Payno explains that the *lépero*'s existence is singular; notwithstanding all the country's cultural changes, it has been preserved intact (75). According to Payno, the *lépero* is the son of artisan fathers and house-servant mothers and usually lives in idleness. He says that although the *lépero* is not hard-working in school, he is astute in worldly matters; and that, as there is no one to take care of him at home, he spends his life in the streets throwing stones, rolling around in

⁸⁵ Samuel Ramos in *El perfil*, "psychoanalyzes" the *pelado* (69-82). He calls *pelados* "fauna," a being without principles, generally mis-trusting, bragging and cowardly and who "as subject lacks all human value and in fact (...) is incapable of acquiring it" (76). It is clear that Ramos is referring to the *mezcla* mass and that he casts his evaluation from the enlightened *criollo* pedestal supported on a 19th-century ideology on races and Vasconcelos' cosmic mythology. His essay is worth a full study from the Afro-Hispanic American perspective.

the mud along with other children or pulling on a kite. "Normally, parents are unusually cruel when they correct minor faults, while they tolerate serious ones such as obscene language, and the small thefts he commits in the vicinity" (75).

In Payno's appraisal the vagrants of centuries past are now underemployed and their children have inherited some characteristics such as *lépero* speech,⁸⁶ vagrancy, inclination for the worldly, and a challenging attitude toward the establishment, and particularly against the main censor of the time, the Catholic Church. This *lépero*, after turning into a temporary hero by fiercely fighting the better-equipped enemy forces during the French invasion, according to Aguirre Beltrán, acquires the name *chinaco* (179), the same name given to liberal soldiers during the War of Reform already mentioned. These two "oddities" observed and described by Manuel Payno, that is, the *lépero* turned *chinaco*, and the *china*, became an image of popular nationalism during the cultural phase of the Revolution, but not before erasing all traces of the Afro contribution to this picture.

The stories told in *La vida inútil* are from before 1910 and from right up to 1920. It is possible that the author wanted to provide an overview of the situation that ultimately triggered the armed conflict, and the conditions in the area left by the ten-year struggle. "There have been many yesterdays since we've seen one another! It's going to be ten years since the tower in Santa Clara" (147). Later

⁸⁶ *Jarocho* speech, the one from Tlacotalpan and Alvarado, Veracruz, is well known in Mexico as *lépero* speech. It must be remembered that the name "*jarocho*" was the term applied in Veracruz to the offspring of black and Amerindian" (Aguirre 179).

the Revolution is recalled: "I have gone through battle-fields filled with corpses like a victorious general inhaling the stench of putrefied flesh" (157). Finally, the reader is taken to the days after the armed phase of the war when the narrator unexpectedly runs into Pito in Morelia (146).

La vida inútil records Pito's "pilgrimage" throughout Michoacan (149) and the nearby area. Alvaro Ochoa Serrano mentions that, according to Ramón Sanchez in 1896, the presence of visibly black Mexicans could be observed in various areas of the state (where Pito drifts in and out), for instance in the Jiquilpan district (93).

It is precisely in a Jiquilpan arcade that Pito goes to eat *menudo* (124), a stew offspring of the *mondongo* dish studied in Chapter Two. But the *menudo* is only one of the keys to unearth the presence of the Afro element present in the ethos and in the features of some of the characters in *La vida inútil*. Throughout the narrative there are other keys and "psycho-alcoholic" digressions (221) that, although blurred and diluted, point toward the Afro dimension of the area where the anecdotes that divide this work take place.

Among the keys that point out the Afro element in the area's *mezclas* are the following: the inference that Pito does not belong to the "privileged *castas*" (15). Pito being a *lépero* prototype: he is identified as a knave (21), who mocks modernity (28), who laughs at humanist precepts (183), who satirizes the clergy (210) and the privileged *castas* (58) and scorns the government (59, 82, 85), thus echoing his daring Afro ancestors who would gather in the plazas to drink spirits, sing profanities and dance lasciviously openly challenging the Catholic Church

and the State. Another key is that Pito is a musician who plays the latest songs (36), popular themes (123), and that he is a people's poet (111, 113, 123-124, 178) whose mouth allows their "spirit to talk" (41).

Other keys in support of this reading are the mention of a "blackish" and "pockmarked" face of a priest whom Pito treats well, and whose mother and sister live in Santa Clara (62). It is also pointed out that Irene's skin is the "color of a cinnamon stick," that she is the daughter of a muleteer (92), and that the store belonging to Pito's uncle is called *El Moro Musa* (97) (The Moor). This uncle's daughters, according to the narrator, would seem to be from different parents because they are "tall and blond and short and black" (97). Chucha, "the darkest in color" of the two daughters looks like a "naughty little monkey" (97), and she has "the white teeth of an unconscious little monkey" (103).

At the same time other cultural texts are invoked when *los sonos de la sierra y el jarabe* (110) and the dances popularly known as *las danzas bullangueras* (150) are mentioned. Moreover, direct references are made to the color line dividing poverty and the other side (173); in addition, "black" and "white" feminine "flesh" is brought into the picture to eroticize it, thus making it more attractive to the common person (200). A "blackish woman" is mentioned as well (203).

With all of these pieces of the picture it would be difficult to argue that the Mexican *lépero* prototype and his people presented in the novel are other than the historical Mexican *mezclas* in Michoacan area at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. The image can be complemented with the

following facts: in the district of Jiquilpan a noticeable Afro presence is documented at the end of the 19th century; and in the following places around Michoacan the black presence is recorded: Zamora, around the Chapala swamp (northeast Michoacan today), in Apatzingán, Pizándaro, Tacámbaro, Taretán, La Huacana, Tuzantla, Tancítaro, Valladolid (today Morelia, the capital city), Tlalpujahua, Ucareo-Tziritzícuaró, Zinapécuaro, Maravatío, Tuxpan, Taximaroa, Zitácuaro, Patzcuaro, Paracho, Ario, Turicato, Urecho, Apatzingán, Sirándaro, Zacatula, Peribán, Tlazazalca-La Piedad, Zamora-Jacona (Ochoa 73). Other places in the state can be mentioned, such as sugar mills, *haciendas* (farms or plantations), *obrajes* (rudimentary factories for manufacturing different goods), mines, and domestic jobs where blacks were first utilized and their descendants, the *mezclas*, later.

The Michoacan "picaresque world"⁸⁷ evoked in *La vida inútil* informs the reader about the black presence and its influence in the area. This is confirmed by the popular taste for *los sones de la sierra* music, which echoes *los sones jarochos* and by extension the Afro-Cuban *sones montunos*. At the same time, this musical presence echoes the *mezcla* dances and songs persecuted during the colonial period, which are the basis of the Mexican satire (González Casanova 82). These dances and songs carry the Afro taste and an Afro sense of humor as a central ingredient. Under the idea of positive *mestizaje* whatever

⁸⁷ Fernando O Assuncao in *El tango y sus circunstancias* uses the concept *mundo picaresco* (picaresque world) to define a time and place in the middle of the 19th century Rio de la Plata area during the genesis of the Tango dance, songs and worldview. Among other experiences, Tango is linked to the black experience in the South American zone (23-85).

is Afro in the Mexican mestizo or in Mexican *mestizaje* is Afro and alive and is equally important and intrinsic to the essence of Mexican-ness as Amerindian, Spanish and all other elements are.

It is possible that the author of *La vida inútil* preferred the picaresque structure to treat an extremely delicate topic: the state of the nation immediately before and after the Revolution from a point of view that at least superficially appears to be that of the man in the street. But what is revealed beyond the false tears⁸⁸ is a narrative skillfully woven in popular language that nevertheless propagates the "cosmic race" notions contained in the discourse on nation during the cultural phase of the Mexican Revolution. Through a nearly seamless *criollo* adaptation of the *lépero* language and sense of humor, the author is able to take his message to the masses. His ventriloquism becomes evident, as the white aesthetic and black phobia informing his views are detected under Jackson's lens. Jackson has identified the white aesthetic as a pattern in other Latin American literary works produced where there is—or there has been an African presence. Under the white aesthetic and black phobia, a person, including non-whites, actually comes to believe that only white is beautiful and sees as inferior and ugly anything considered non-white.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Jackson introduces the concept "False Tears for the Black Man" in *The Black Image in Latin American Literature* (Contents vii).

⁸⁹ Gorostiza's drama from the "Identity Theatre" *El color de nuestra piel* (*The Color of Our Skin*) (1952), puts an end to the myth that Mexico is a racial democracy (Neglia 164). Through a psychological analysis of a Mexican mestizo family, where there is a blond and blue eyed son along with a darker brother and sister and a father who denies being a mestizo himself though he is light dark, Gorostiza confronts his audience with the fact that well after four hundred years

The white aesthetic is found to be present in *La vida inútil* notwithstanding the explanation of the author where he points out that Pito "was not a sensuous person obsessed neither with black nor with white flesh" (200). During a delirious episode, Pito describes beauty as "snow white shoulders" in a desired woman (168). When he refers to Chucha, his cousin, after mentioning that she is the "more toasted in color" and that her white teeth contrast with her color, he compares her repeatedly with an "unconscious and naughty little monkey" (97, 102). But this is not all. Father Pureco, described as having a "blackish and pockmarked face," according to Pito is ignorant, intellectually incapable, and naturally good (62-73). Also, a *son* musician is marked by his speech form and his rhythm "I am tuned fo' *jarabe*" (110).

As a conclusion, a brief analysis of such descriptions in Jackson's light will point out that non-white images in *La vida inútil* are stereotypical and far from real. Departing from the stereotypes of visibly black mestizos a narrative responding to the *criollo* worldview is found. Under this perspective racial prejudice is maximized against those people who deviate the most from the norm. The greatest beauty is compared with "snow" and the musician "cannot talk well" (he swallows phonemes, thus echoing *jarocho* speech). "The acceptance of these esthetic standards produces those practices common in

of intermixing, Mexican mestizos, fair and dark, continue to be non-white and the practitioners of what Quince Duncan has called "racist psychocide" (53). Two syndromes may describe this condition, a legacy of Vasconcelos' ideology, and its current effect on non-white Mexicans: the "white superiority syndrome" marked by a "fraudulent denial of an African heritage, though running the risk of discovery" (*The Black* 10); and the false memory syndrome mentioned later in this work where the subjects affected have been persuaded that something that exists never was.

Latin America ...by which individuals seek to 'whiten' themselves" (Jackson, *The Black* xii). These are the type of stereotypical images that support the myth of white beauty and the phobia against blacks and that highlight the manner in which the white aesthetic has "taken a strong foothold in the consciousness of Latin Americans of all colors (Jackson, *The Black* xiii). Jackson explains:

It has become clearer that the somatic distance, conditioned by archetypal images of color and corresponding racial myths, has had an enormous impact on the pattern of race relations in Latin America [...] The association of the color black with ugliness, sin, darkness, immorality, Manichean metaphor, with the inferior, the archetype of the lowest order, and the color white with the opposite of these qualities partly explains the racist preconceptions and negative images of the black man projected—at times despite the author's good intentions—in much of [Latin American literature].

(*The Black* xiii)

Various authors cited by Jackson have made clear that racial stereotypes, prejudiced expressions, and racial terms, among others, are commonplace in Latin American literature and other American literatures:

Racism and the white aesthetic exist in Spanish America, as in Brazil and the non-Hispanic Caribbean, as controlling factors in the lives of black people. Indeed, a cult of whiteness and a corresponding fear of blackness, whether ethnic, political, or social, are part of a tradition dramatized in Hispanic literature from Lope de

Rueda's *Eufemia* (1576) to Francisco Arrivi's *Máscara puertorriqueña* (1971) with numerous examples to be found in between and after. (*The Black* xiv)

The white aesthetic, according to Jackson, beyond producing revealing instances of a white racial consciousness heritage, distorts the literary black image. In this type of narrative the black character does not go beyond being "purely and simply the sum of prejudices, myths, and collective attitudes of a given group" (*The Black* xiv). This, under James Snead's coding, sheds additional light on the topic of this study by bringing to the forefront the added negative effects toward blacks created by repeating and reinforcing stereotypes, something that *La vida inútil* certainly achieves and thereby becomes part of the discourse on nation developed by *criollos* in order to usurp power and keep it for themselves.

Chapter Four

Angelitos negros, a Film from the "Golden Epoch"⁹⁰ of Mexican Cinema: The Coding of Visibly Black Mexicans In and Through a Far-reaching Medium

The coding of blacks in film, as in the wider society, involves a history of images and signs associating black skin color with servile behavior and marginal status. While these depictions may have reflected prior economic oppression of blacks, they also tend to perpetuate it. Through the exact repetition which is film's main virtue, these associations became part of film's typological vocabulary... "Codes" are not singular portrayals of one thing or another, but larger, complex relationships.

James Snead

The family melodrama *Angelitos negros* (1948) (*Little Black Angels*), produced in Mexico by the Rodríguez Brothers and directed by Joselito Rodríguez, is a cinematographic message⁹¹ about visibly black Mexicans

⁹⁰ Maximiliano Maza, in an effort to dispel confusion as to whether all black-and-white motion pictures are in fact from the Golden Epoch of Mexican cinematography, creates a sub-category he calls the "Golden Years of the Golden Epoch." He explains, "Our television culture has conditioned us to consider any Mexican black-and-white film as part of The Golden Epoch. The true 'golden years' of the Golden Epoch would coincide with the Second World War (1939-1945)," (Maza 1). Maza says "Mexican cinematographic production had reached a high level by 1939. In fact 'The Golden Epoch' began years before WWII, a factor often cited as a direct cause" (Maza, *Introducción*). Thus, according to Maza, the Golden Epoch began well before the war, but the best years, what he calls "The Golden Years" nevertheless coincide with the war.

⁹¹ Cinematographic message here is the capacity of film to transmit an idea with the advantages that are particular to this medium. Film has the capacity to influence a frame through sound, predisposing the audience to receive the message in an intended manner. It has the capacity to create an ambience to manipulate the general mood by the intensity, scarcity, or absence of light. It has the advantage of plotting the story in the style most convenient for a given cultural context in order to enable a "dialogue" with the audience across space and time (as an example, a film from another epoch, from another country, from another language capable of making us feel angry, melancholic, sad, happy or totally sexual). Excellent examples of this way of projecting a message to the

broadcasted in a far-reaching medium.⁹² This black-and-white sound motion picture is a graphic example of the homogenizing discourse on nation adopted and institutionalized by the PRI in Mexico during the cultural phase of the Mexican Revolution (1920-1968). It is part of the ethnic integration discourse of that period, found in Mexican film,⁹³ literature, music, dance, painting, and images, which became standard badges of Mexican national identity. *Angelitos negros* is an illustration of an expressed mode of thinking that produced the myth of a "cosmic race" as the modern nation was forming; a myth used to obliterate the black African element of Mexican *mestizaje* while claiming through narrative that blacks and their descendents in Mexico had been "diluted," "assimilated" or "integrated" to disappearance.

Angelitos negros is the story of the "suffering" and "misfortunes" of Ana Luisa, a racist, well-off, educated visibly blond woman. Ana Luisa does not know

masses are *Cantinflas'* movies that "talked the talk and walked the walk" of the Mexican *pelado*. These films reached people from Chicago, Los Angeles, Florida, and all over Latin America where there was access to TV or to itinerant theaters.

⁹² Academic investigation on the Afro component of Mexican *mestizaje* is in its early stages. Most of the work being done is relatively recent and is in the areas of history, linguistics, anthropology, ethnology, music and dance. A considerable portion of that investigation relies heavily on "non-Mexican" perspectives and "non-Mexicans" are doing an important part of the work. This may be understood if one considers that black Mexicans are part of the greater phenomenon known as the "African Diaspora." There is no local or international criticism to be found about the manner in which people of African descent have been and are portrayed and characterized in Mexican cinematography.

⁹³ James Snead defines film as a "series of recorded and repeatable moving images that aims to make a viewer believe in the story or reality it claims to portray" (134). This definition is hereby adopted.

until the story begins to unfold that she is the daughter of "Mercé" (Mercedes), her visibly black housemaid and that therefore black blood runs in her veins. As the story develops, Mercé confesses to the catholic priest that Ana Luisa de la Fuente is her daughter:

I was the maid in her father's house. Don Agustín de la Fuente. He was a rich widower. She was born white as him, blond as the sun. She was so beautiful he began to love her. He decided to give her his name and his fortune so long as I did not claim her. What mother in my place would not have accepted? It was a matter of my daughter's happiness. He was such a good man that he allowed me to stay to take care of her. When he died we were left alone. She doesn't know anything about this. She must never find out. (*Angelitos*)

Ana Luisa marries a white-looking-mestizo orphan, José Carlos Ruíz, a famous singer who refers to himself, and is referred to by Mercé, as "white." Superficially, José Carlos is kind to all visibly black people and apparently he is free from racial prejudice. When Ana Luisa and José Carlos have Belén, a mulatto daughter, the conflict erupts.

As the melodrama continues, José Carlos learns from Mercé that Ana Luisa is her daughter but consents not to reveal Mercé's life secret because this knowledge, according to the catholic priest's advice, may be life-threatening for Ana Luisa's already frail emotional state (caused by her giving birth to visibly black Belén). However, when Ana Luisa strikes Mercé, causing her to fall down

the stairs, José Carlos can no longer keep silent and suddenly reveals to Ana Luisa that Mercé is her mother. Ana Luisa had thought that her daughter's blackness came from José Carlos' bloodline. From the time of Belen's birth she had gone into a deep depression for what she saw as her greatest misfortune and made José Carlos' life and everybody else's life miserable.

In the end, Ana Luisa comes to her senses after causing her mother's death by injury. Then she appears to come to terms with her "fate". Following this, José Carlos absolves Ana Luisa readily: from having abused her visibly black mother to death; from having abused her visibly black child by openly and publicly rejecting and denying any relation to her for years; from having publicly discriminated against his visibly black friends; from having abused him directly over the years when Ana Luisa accused him of destroying her life by giving her a black child. The storyline seems to echo the fallacy that Mexico is some sort of a racial democracy and that there is no black resistance.

Following a brief historical preamble on Mexican cinema to set the context for the argument, this chapter will analyze the manner in which stereotypes of black people are used to code visibly black Mexicans in *Angelitos negros* in order to propagate and perpetuate the idea that blacks are inferior.⁹⁴ This chapter will

⁹⁴ *La negra Angustias* (1949) mentioned in the introduction is another film of this type. It is based on Francisco Rojas González's 1944 novel by the same name. Angustias is the daughter of a mulatto road bandit who has been imprisoned until the time she meets him when he is old. She grows up in the Morelos' mountains under the care of an Indian medicine woman. As the Revolution sweeps the area, and as a consequence of hurting someone while trying to defend herself from being raped, she joins the war and becomes a feared *coronela* (colonel) due to her innate daringness and bravado. However, toward the end, the audience learns that one of her greatest desires has been to learn to read and

propose that the message regarding black people in *Angelitos negros* is a reproduction, adapted for Spanish speaking audiences, of *Imitation of Life* (1934) a Hollywood⁹⁵ film directed by John Stahal and Claudine Colbert. It will explain how a white supremacy message moves through languages and cultures promoting images that are more fantastic than real. It will demonstrate that the message in *Angelitos negros* deploys a Eurocentric mass-produced negative view of black people for mass consumption.

It will be shown that the predominant aesthetic of *Angelitos negros* is the white aesthetic. James Snead's approach in *White Screens Black Images: The Dark Side of Hollywood* (1994) will be incorporated into Jackson's perspective. This enables an aesthetic "reading" of the characterization and portrayal of black people in *Angelitos negros* in terms of the codes reproduced and reinforced through the stereotypical images of black people in the film (Snead 136). Snead states:

Stereotypes ultimately connect to form larger complexes of symbols and connotations. These codes then begin to form a kind of "private conversation" among themselves without needing to refer back to the real world for their facticity. The pleasure of recognizing codes displaces the necessity for a viewer to verify them. Since many

write Spanish. Also, she falls in love with her weakling *criollo* teacher and ends up living in a room in Mexico City with her whitened infant son. The teacher collects her pension and recognizes her only as a lover; actually he is ashamed of their relationship.

⁹⁵ In "Las mitologías del cine mexicano," Carlos Monsiváis points out, "The same as everywhere, in México, US film industry is the inevitable model...everything is learned from Hollywood..." (2).

mass-media images today claim to be neither reality nor fantasy (witness the docu-drama), there are no useful criteria by which to inspect or challenge the claims to truth that these visual images and events constantly make. (Snead 141)

Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, in *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, bring to the forefront of the debate on stereotyping in popular culture some methodological questions "about the underlying premises of character-or stereotype-centered approaches" (198). They warn that, "the exclusive preoccupation with images, whether positive or negative, can lead to a kind of essentialism" (199). Shohat and Stam bring to light the complexity of the question through a series of examples of what they see as a "black experience." They propose that that experience differs according to the various cultural contexts where it occurs. Shohat and Stam conclude that a critique of stereotyping should begin only after a film has been understood within its cultural milieu and not "as the application of an *a priori* schema" (213).

While a work should be analyzed within its cultural context, it should be clear as well that any expressed mode of thinking or discourse dealing with the question of blacks of the diaspora, including *Angelitos negros*, needs to be concurrently understood within a worldwide context to avoid the possibility of regionalizing, reducing, or minimizing a truly universal problem that has affected for centuries and continues to affect people across cultures and languages at a global level.

Such an approach is particularly relevant here because a narrative form that carries an adverse message conceived in another language and culture first is being confronted. The message was developed in the United States. So, did Hollywood export messages based on its world-view, that is, on the manner in which it perceived blacks? Was this world-view acceptable and adaptable across languages and cultures for the reproduction and reinforcement of an adverse discourse on blacks at a continental (or world) level?

Although the script of *Angelitos negros* is solely attributed to Joselito Rodríguez, according to Rita Wilson, *Angelitos negros* "is clearly based on the 1933 novel, *Imitation of Life*" by the United States writer, Fannie Hurst (1889-1968) (Wilson 3). Hurst's novel was adapted into two Hollywood films by the same name. The first *Imitation of Life* film directed by John Stahal with Claudette Colbert was shot in 1934. The second *Imitation of Life* film directed by Douglas Sirk, featuring Lana Turner, was filmed in 1959 (Fischer 4). It should also be mentioned that there was a second *Angelitos negros* film shot in Mexico by Joselito Rodríguez in 1969 featuring Manuel López Ochoa and Martha Rangel with the Afro-American actress Juanita Moore (Wilt). Juanita Moore played the victimized mammy in the 1959 *Imitation of Life*. It could be argued that the stories in *Angelitos negros* and *Imitation of life* are two different stories at the pre-text level, but the subtexts are comparable in the way in which black people are coded. The stories are plotted differently, the roles are not quite the same, and the sets are dissimilar, nevertheless resemblance is found in comparing the

message conveyed as far as what the filmmakers want us to believe and continue believing about blackness.

In *Angelitos negros*, non-black people, literally painted black, play two of the central “black” characters. The manner in which visibly black Mexicans are narrated exposes the ideology upon which the story is centered and it allows the placement of the film within the official discourse about visibly black people during the cultural phase of the Mexican Revolution where a whitening tendency dominates the narrative on nation. According to Jackson, while *mestizaje* is an indisputable process that black people have undergone, “the process of racial bleaching denies the...black the recognizable African characteristics of his physical features and thus his black identity” (*The Black 2*). It is important to note also that this film is produced in a country that, according to its own official discourse, has imagined itself as non-white.

Angelitos negros belongs to a period in Mexican cinematography identified by Maximiliano Maza as *Después de la Guerra* (after the war). This period is dominated by films known as *Rumberas y Arrabal* (Maza online). *Rumberas* refers to the *rumba*, an Afro-Cuban rhythm adopted in Mexico that was born in the Cuban city slums that grew considerably at the end of the 19th century when some 250,000 slaves were freed and poured into the cities in search of employment (Alén 82). The *arrabal* refers mainly to Mexico City slums that grew quickly between 1940 and 1950. As they prepared for World War II, the industrialized nations had switched their production priorities from consumer goods to war goods. One of the immediate results of this change in productivity elsewhere was

the industrialization of Mexico. The possibility of work attracted people from the provinces to the city and they usually settled in the slums. *Rumberas* and *arrabal* films deal with life in the poor areas of the city and with the growing urbanization. These pictures are different from the *charro*⁹⁶ films that, according to Ricardo Pérez Montfort, dominated the industry from 1920 to 1946 (93). *Charro* films were used to cast an ideal image of the Mexican, an image that appears whiter than anything else and thereby negates the African root of Mexico and the Afro-chinaco element of the *charro* image and music.

Maza reports that between 1940 and 1950 the Mexican urban population grew more than ever. In 1946, Miguel Alemán Valdés became the first civilian president since 1932. Mexico's national infrastructure was greatly developed under his presidency. Also, according to Maza, President Alemán decreed *La Ley de la Industria Cinematográfica* (Law of the Film Industry) in an attempt to dissolve a monopoly on film showing headed by the North American, William Jenkins (Maza online). This strategy placed the film industry under government control and, perhaps unknowingly, established its bureaucratic foundations. Another setback for the dwindling Mexican film industry was the emergence of television in the early 1950s.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Keep in mind that the *charro* image is the "sanitized" version of the *chinaco* image.

⁹⁷ In the case of *Angelitos negros*, the emergence of television would be favorable. The movie was shown on TV often and thus it reached a wider audience than it would have reached otherwise. It should be mentioned also that in the 1980's the story was made into a soap opera of some 120 half-hour episodes featuring Manuel López Ochoa, and that it was transmitted outside Mexico.

With the end of the war, and as Hollywood re-entered the market full force, the position held by Mexican cinematography began to lose importance. Film companies in Mexico began to spend less per film in an effort to preserve productivity at the same level reached during the war. The result of this approach was the proliferation of films known as *churros*, "low budget films made in a short time and of poor quality in general" (Maza online). Pedro Infante, one of the central characters in *Angelitos Negros* and the indisputable star of the *cine de arrabal*, was the protagonist in *Los tres García* (1946) (*The Three Garcías*), *Nosotros los pobres* (1947) (*We the Poor*), *Ustedes los ricos* (1947) (*You the Rich*), *Dicen que soy mujeriego* (1948) (*They Say that I am a Womanizer*), and *Los tres Huastecos* (1948) (*The Three Huastecos*).

Two additional points should be made. *Angelitos negros* was one of three movies filmed in 1948 in which Infante was one of the principal characters. He was an idol, among the most popular male stars of the decade, and was considered a model of success (the provincial boy who comes to the country's capital and makes it big). In 1948, he was at the pinnacle of his acting and singing career. Loved by the masses, he was known as *el ídolo de las chorreadas* (something to the effect of "vulgar-women's hero"). This last point is particularly important if one considers that his image in any movie of the epoch would attract a mass audience susceptible to persuasion by whatever role he represented.

According to David Wilt, in *Historia documental del cine mexicano*, Emilio García Riera says that, although *Angelitos negros* played only for two weeks in

Mexico City, it was a big hit, so it can be said that the film had an immediate impact on a large number of people in the city. Wilt also mentioned that to find out how popular *Angelitos negros* really was, one would have to consider the number of subsequent runs in "neighborhood and provincial theatres," and obviously on television as well.

Angelitos negros, a cinematographic *churro*, is important because it may be the most widely-known of a group of films from the late 1940s and early 1950s that presented, as their central theme, the black question. Films such as *Negra consentida* (1948) (*Spoiled Black Woman*), *La negra Angustias* (1949) (*Angustias the Black Woman*), *Negro es mi color* (1951) (*Black is my Color*), and *Píntame angelitos blancos* (1954) (*Paint White Angels for Me*), among others. The "rediscovery" of visibly Afro Mexicans in the mid forties, dealt a heavy blow to the myth of a purely Amerindian and "Spanish" *mestizaje*. It brought to the forefront the question of diversity in Mexico. Mexico was forced to revise its own discourse in order to get in step with its World War II Allies.

That some sort of "new" awareness on the black question was arising in Mexico when Miguel Alemán Valdés was inaugurated president can be readily seen. The same year, 1946, the Mexican anthropologist and ethnologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, returning from Northwestern University, published *La población negra*. In Aguirre Beltrán's words "In spite of a good reception [his work on Afro-Mexicans] did not stimulate this interesting line of investigation" (Aguirre 11). Aguirre Beltrán continued his work and in 1948 he carried out an ethnographic investigation of the visibly black Mexican population in Cuijla, Guerrero (Aguirre

11). Curiously, that same year *Angelitos negros* was filmed and released, marking the genesis of a short-lived period of discursive acceptance of the existence of visibly black Mexicans, who, of course, knew their place.

Angelitos negros can be considered as a piece of the propaganda used to deal with the black question in Mexico after the Second World War. According to James Snead, a "film becomes 'propaganda' and no longer merely 'fiction' when its aim is to introduce or reinforce a set of political power relationships between social groups..." (140). *Angelitos negros* reinforces the power relationships instituted since colonial times between visibly black people and lighter skinned people by positioning the darker people as subservient.

Angelitos negros is of central import to a black experience and to a black identity in Mexico, and to Mexican experience and identity as a whole since the majority of the population in Mexico are so called "mestizos" and the majority of Mexican mestizos according to official and unofficial history have black African blood in various degrees. *Angelitos negros* allows the viewer to perceive the white aesthetic that dominates the official narrative of the period, and to see how visibly black Mexicans are still coded in and through this valuable piece of evidence of the eugenicist thinking instituted as an ideological perspective by José Vasconcelos.

Juan Carlos Ramírez Pimienta in his essay, "Del rancho al arrabal: guías para ayudar a formar un estado nación en el cine mexicano de La Época de Oro," (From the Ranch to the Ghetto: Guides to Help Form a Nation-State in the Mexican Cinema of the Golden Epoch) asks: "How...is it possible to think that the PRI-government did not design and implement a cultural policy to help it stay in

power?" (Ramírez 211).⁹⁸ To speak of the possibility of a black experience and of a black identity in a country conceived of as a mestizo-nation-in-the-process-of-whitening may have been considered tantamount to an act of dissidence. This is probably why Joselito Rodríguez chose to deal with the subject in accordance with the official discourse. In *Angelitos Negros*, *criollos*, white-looking-mestizos and even Arabs are "white;" there are no Amerindians, except in their role as assimilated Indomestizos; and blacks are exotic, pure musical and passionate beings from a tropical paradigm (victimized servants, innocent children, or resigned friends) who are capable of unquestioning love and friendship for the "white" characters.

Angelitos negros asserts class as the principal divider of Mexican people, and in this manner minimizes the "racial" friction that nevertheless exists in the very house where the drama develops. Rodríguez's story proposes that in Mexican society at large there are good, at least acceptable, relations between the "social" groups, and that the relations in the central part of the story, the domestic situation, can and will be resolved by a higher type of understanding obtained by Ana Luisa, the very perpetrator of the conflict.

Angelitos negros was supposed to be an "anti-racist" film. However, "real" black people play minor characters, as is the case of Chimy Monterrey who plays Fernando. He is a character capable of supporting open discrimination, as his due, without complaint. Fernando is the ever-understanding friend of José Carlos.

⁹⁸ In 1946, during the government of Miguel Alemán Valdés, the *Partido Revolucionario Mexicano* (PRM) (Mexican Revolutionary Party) became the PRI.

Snead has identified a similar role as "the loyal sidekick/retainer" (142). Emilia Guiú plays the central character, Ana Luisa. Rita Montaner, a "white" Cuban actress heavily painted to appear black plays "Mercé." Pedro Infante plays José Carlos Ruiz; and Titina Romy, heavily painted as well, plays Belén (she is Joselito Rodríguez, the film director's daughter).

José Carlos suffers "the prejudice of having no prejudice." He is oblivious of non-white people's plight against the white superiority syndrome. He is capable of "listening" to all sides but does not want to perceive as racist the attitudes before him. The film suggests that he is a good-natured person, unmindful of racial discrimination. He is literally blinded by his "deep love" for the blond looking Ana Luisa, while he is unaware of the unwavering and understanding love the visibly black Mexican woman, Isabel, has had for him secretly over the years. He acknowledges that visibly black Mexicans are as they are because that is "the way God made them." He has a sort of puppy love for Mercé. Although she is his elder, he calls her "my little tar ball," "my little chocolate bar," "my little pile of soot," "my little chunk of tar," "little cinnamon flower," "ugly negra," "fine little black one made from the little charcoal that makes diamonds," among other names. At the level of subtext, no matter how "sweet" these names may appear, they position Mercé in opposition to Ana Luisa.

Conversely, he calls Ana Luisa "Goldilocks," "Blondie," "the most beautiful girl in the city," and compares her with the sun itself (just as Mercé does; this points out the existence of a collective belief). Moreover, his supposed best friend, who according to him is almost his "brother," carries water (while José Carlos'

hands are free) to wash him and scrub his back. He is a kind of mediator who accepts things as if prescribed by a divine force. Even José Carlos' love for Ana Luisa is presented as divine. He is capable of suffering the unthinkable, and of accepting the suffering of the visibly black owing his love for Ana Luisa, a type of love that in the end of the *churro* succeeds.

The Mexican government went so far as to create a censorship organism to ban movies considered defamatory (García 148). It is paradoxical to find that while official Mexico noted the way Mexicans were portrayed by Hollywood, it was incapable of recognizing the manner in which visibly black Mexicans were presented to the viewer in *Angelitos negros* by Mexicans whose overwhelming majority, as mentioned above, are supposed to be non-whites, according to the very cosmic race myth.

James Snead identifies three strategies by which stereotypes on race are forged and reinforced: mythification, marking, and omission. He proposes that film is never one person's story but "is always typical, broadcasting certain codes about social status and interrelationships" (143).

In *Angelitos negros* the viewer is confronted with "mythification" when José Carlos is elevated in the introductory scenes of the film. He is clean and elegantly dressed in a cashmere suit, white starched shirt, and tie (in the Mexico of the late 1940s as a gentleman was supposed to dress). He has a shiny late-model convertible, and he is confidently buying a newspaper in front of a Mediterranean-style house, indicating a well-to-do neighborhood.

The scenes are well illuminated like a sunny day. José Carlos is overly cheerful, thus denoting a person who has no apparent worries beyond enjoying life. He portrays a secure individual who feels good enough to approach another individual without formal introduction, namely the visibly blond Ana Luisa who has come out of the Mediterranean-style mansion to hail a taxi.

Fernando, on the other hand, would not even dream of approaching a white rich woman, knowing that he would have no chance for a positive result, and that to do so would be an open invitation for real trouble. Yet, Isabel, a mulatto singer, who has worked for years along with Fernando and the famous singer José Carlos, has been secretly in love with José Carlos. Her broken heart is shown as something accepted, even by Fernando (a visibly black man who is portrayed as her confidant or brother), as some sort of predestined penance. The visibly black characters are presented as other than individuals, as if tied by blood and destiny and desirous of assimilation into the dominant group. Their aesthetic is the white aesthetic. All visibly black people in the film seem to be destined to suffer due to their color. As Snead states, "[t]he coding of blacks in film, as in the wider society, involves a history of images and signs associating black skin color with servile behavior and marginal status" (142).

According to Snead, mythification, the magnification of the film image, "can both elevate and degrade," and he explains that in fact both "properties are interdependent" since the same "language that magnifies white heroes reduces black people" (143). In *Angelitos negros* "white" characters in positions of control are juxtaposed with the likes of a mulatto old woman, who has always been, and

continues to be until her death, a live-in housemaid. As the narrative unfolds, the viewer learns that Mercé's life is a tragedy, a story of dependence. The film introduces Mercé in a large mansion, rendering her character even more insignificant, and she is contrasted with her boss Ana Luisa (Guiú), a young blonde, well-educated woman presented as the owner of the house. Snead elucidates: "soon, by mythification and repetition, filmed images become models, positive or negative, for behavior, describing structures, limits, and an overall repertoire from which viewers in the real world select their actions and opinions" (143).

The second of Snead's tactics for coding is "marking." According to Snead, "Marking the black allows the viewer to 'register' the image" (145). He explains that this is necessary due to the fact that a strict definition of what "blackness" is cannot be provided. He says that "The terms of racial identity—'white' and 'black'—denote not any one thing, but a whole range of possibilities, all defined, not positively by being this or that, but negatively, by not being 'white' " (145). In *Angelitos negros*, Mercé, the nanny, Belén the tragic mulatto daughter, and Isabel the mulatto afflicted by her one-sided love for José Carlos are played by non-black people marked by heavy black paint. According to Snead, marking meets the "needs of the image-making rhetoric" and by making black representation as black as possible eliminates any ambiguity (145). Marking through contrasting black and white colors in clothing or by the use of light has been used "for stereotypical and ideological purposes" as well (145). The secondary black characters are dressed in various scenes with white clothes to highlight their darkness and they are further

marked as they speak *jarocho*, or Afro Mexican dialect and sing, dance, and play Afro-music in a supposedly white environment.

The third manner in which stereotypes are cast in this film is "omission." *Angelitos negros* clearly omits any reference to visibly black Mexicans who are not children, servants or entertainers. Snead found that in Hollywood "[f]rom the earliest days of film, omission was the method of choice in designing and tailoring mass images of black people" (147). This perspective may be applied to *Angelitos negros*.

It is interesting to note that the story takes place in Mexico City in the late 1940s and that psychologically and socially urban "visibly" black Mexicans of that period are not significantly better off than urban blacks during the colonial period. The fact that historically prominent visibly black Mexicans have existed—such as Yanga, José María Morelos y Pavón, Vicente Guerrero, Vicente Riva Palacio, Lázaro Cárdenas and the *chinacos*, to mention a few—does not appear anywhere in the film. It cannot even be inferred. This is true, despite the fact that, by the time *Angelitos negros* was filmed, at least two states of the nation were already named after visibly Afro Mexicans and that visibly black Mexicans helped shape the nation physically and culturally as leaders of the independence movement, presidents, and as cannon fodder, not to mention the life-giving roles of mothers, wives, sisters and daughters.

Angelitos negros artificially separates the Mexican world of the late 1940s into two well defined paradigms: that of a few markedly identified mulattoes who live tragic lives, and that of people who appear to be non-black and who, for the

most part, are well-to-do. The reason why this inaccurate representation of black people has mattered little to the viewers at large may be derived from the fact that most Mexicans mistakenly believe they have little to do, if at all, with African-ness.

In *Angelitos negros*, white-looking people are mythified while markedly black mulattoes are denigrated. In this manner the superiority of non-blacks is confirmed. Now, logical contradictions and historical inaccuracies aside, how could such misrepresentations of visibly black Mexicans be of any importance in a realm where the official discourse affirms, through all means of expression available, that black people are nearly extinct or "integrated"?

The academically documented "discovery" in the mid 1940s of enclaves in Mexico where black people, allegedly due to isolation, had preserved their Afro-characteristics, and the production of *Angelitos negros* among other films of the epoch on the Black theme, leads to assume that the system enlisted and supported cinematography to disseminate the notion that the whitening process in Mexico was still a reality. The possibility of engaging a problem long forgotten officially, or set aside by the myth of *mestizaje*, was neutralized through cinematic rhetoric. The collective lie of a binary *mestizaje* exclusive of its African root was reinforced in Mexico now through one of the most powerful means of mass persuasion.

The type of narrative found in *Angelitos negros* reproduces and reinforces cinematic stereotypes and is aimed at penetrating susceptible viewers who want-to-be-white (or those who believe they are non-blacks). This type of cultural text allows them to perceive themselves as they wish to be seen by visibly black

people, namely as superior. "Indeed, racism in the cinema might be described as the tendency to recycle certain ethnic codes, already familiar to a series of privileged viewers, in order to reinforce their familiarity, despite the changes that may have gone on in the real world" (Snead 142).

Mercé, the body-servant/mammy/house-maid, while repeating and reinforcing the stereotype of "Aunt Jemima," also shields it from historical change. Every time the film is shown, unless the audience has been trained to question its propagandistic essence, it reiterates stereotypes of visibly black people. It promotes while it perpetuates a sort of dialogue between viewer and image based on power relationships (where visibly black people are forever trapped at the bottom of the physical, psychological and social scale) based on black phobia and a white aesthetic.

In Mexico at large, as a colonial legacy, one of the most derogatory names to be called is *indio* (Indian). This means to be ugly, and barbaric; it means to be an outsider, the "other." But an even worse insult, another colonial legacy, is to be called *negro* (black).

Afro-phobia seems to be common among Mexican mestizos, notwithstanding the fact that they are likely the direct descendants of the *mezclas* who had African blood in them. This may be understood if one takes into consideration that while a considerable percentage of Mexicans are in fact just as "black" as anything else, visibly Afro women and men in Mexico, as well as in other parts of the continent, have been made to feel inferior and have thereby been physically and sexually abused. In Mexico, the most common way to escape

slavery, literally, was through miscegenation. Thus, anyone capable of “passing” and liberating oneself from the “stigma” of blackness, as a matter of life and freedom, learned to follow the whitening trend.

In *Angelitos negros*, the complexity of this Mexican Afro-phobia can be observed in the blond Ana Luisa, a Mexican twist of the stereotype of the tragic mulatto identified in Shohat (195). We learn early in the story that Ana Luisa is in fact a mulatto and that she “really” does not know that she is part black. She is capable of accepting the services provided by Mercé, but she treats her as an infant even though Mercé has raised her. Ana Luisa also discriminates against José Carlos’ friends. In a scene where Fernando is introduced to her she refuses to shake his extended hand, turns her back on him and leaves the room as if not wanting to breath the same air and share the same space.

Ana Luisa despises everything black, even berating José Carlos on one occasion for painting himself black in order to perform on stage. She accepts him as a performer but she does not hide her dislike of the Afro-music and Afro-choreography of the show, and expresses her desire to see him as what he “is.” She clearly has a superior attitude while watching the performance. Her Afro-phobia escalates when, after a long and successful acting tour of Latin America (with seven months of a seemingly wonderful stay in Buenos Aires), they come back happily to Mexico City and she has a mulatto daughter. She does not want any part of her own daughter and she even accuses José Carlos of “dirtying” her life with black blood. The viewer is presented with the perspective that if one is a well-to-do white person, it is an understandable tragedy to have a “black” child.

Ana Luisa suffers tremendously and shuts herself in to suffer her "misfortune" alone. Curiously, although she commits different degrees of child-abuse, all characters show a great deal of understanding towards her, including the well-respected catholic priest. As mentioned before, the priest counsels José Carlos and Mercé that Ana Luisa should not be told that she is a mulatto due to her fragile emotional condition for she may go crazy or lose her life.⁹⁹ Mercé begs José Carlos not to say anything, to spare her "beautiful" daughter any more pain. José Carlos agrees to keep the secret and endures Ana Luisa's abuse due to his "love" and devotion.

The story climaxes when Mercé rolls down the stairs as a consequence of having been slapped on the face by Ana Luisa. José Carlos and the priest are on the second floor and José Carlos screams, "no, she is your mother!" Ana Luisa is startled and looks toward the priest. The priest comes down to hold her and confirms non-verbally what José Carlos has just said. Mercé dies as a consequence of the fall, at which point Ana Luisa "comes" to her senses. She promises to change and take care of her daughter. José Carlos, of course, exonerates Ana Luisa, his "Goldilocks." Ana Luisa literally gets away with murder in *Angelitos negros*.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Ana Luisa's condition in the film can be understood as a metaphor of the modern nation that sees itself as too fragile to confront its own roots just yet: under the white aesthetic in order to be made to appear strong before the world, it must ignore its Afro heritage. To do otherwise would be to create a national catastrophe where the nation could lose its own Eurocentric identity.

¹⁰⁰ This can be seen as a metaphor of the "murdering" or erasure of the Afro legacy to Mexican-ness.

Until the last few scenes of this film, Ana Luisa, the “tragic mulatto,” does not know about her blackness and everybody is sympathetic towards her. This understanding continues even when Ana Luisa explodes, verbally and physically abusing Mercé who has cared for her since birth. Ana Luisa does not have to deal with “passing” as white for even in the end, and according to the official ideology in Mexico disseminated during the cultural phase of the Revolution, to look non-black is to look “beautiful.” Ana Luisa has been saved and her implied sentence is to have to accept her “black” daughter who nevertheless is on her way to whiteness.

The black stereotypes and white mythification marked by cinematic technique in this Mexican *churro* connect with other images and narratives distributed in Mexico since colonial times that were adopted officially as discourse on nation at the onset of the cultural phase of the Revolution. Once the connection is made, and codes formed, the real world is bypassed. The cinematic narrative is pleasurable to the target audience (all of those susceptible viewers wanting to be, at least visibly, non-black) displacing the necessity of verifying the codes. As Snead has said, “[s]o the history of black film stereotypes is the history of the denial of history in favor of an artificially constructed general truth about the unchanging black character” (139).

The Mexico of the late forties dealt in this manner with the “rediscovery” of blacks. In a way, it told the public that everything was okay, that “black” blacks were few and that soon they would be willingly and happily assimilated. This discourse was “convincing” enough for its allies as well. It helped Mexico reinforce

and preserve its "progressive" profile in the modern world, an appearance acquired as a result of its stance during WWII.

Today, one of the problems with *Angelitos negros* is that it continues to be copied and shown without warning. Caution ought to be given, as to the negative effects—psychological, societal and political—the message in the film has had.

This is of particular importance for a population affected by the "false memory syndrome."¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ This concept was adopted from a commentary published in *The Vancouver Sun*, Thursday, December 23, 1999, E 1. People affected with this condition have been persuaded that something that exists never was. Gorostiza's *El color de nuestra piel*, is a prime representation of this condition that affects Mexican mestizos whose views are shaped by black phobia and a white aesthetic.

Chapter Five

La muerte de Artemio Cruz, a Post-Modern Nation Building Narrative: The Continued Cleansing of the Afro Component of Mexican *Mestizaje*

The ideal of *mestizaje*, so pejoratively translated as miscegenation, was based in the reality of mixed races to which the positivists ascribed different virtues and failings, and which had to amalgamate if anything like national unity was to be produced. Unity, in positivist rhetoric, was not so much a political or economic concept as it was biological. Since growth meant modernization and Europeanization, the most extreme ideologues (like Argentina's Domingo F. Sarmiento) advocated a combined policy of white immigration and Indian or black removal, while others...[like the Mexican ideologues] settled for redeeming the "primitive" races through miscegenation and ideological whitening.

(Doris Sommer 81)

Carlos Fuentes, in *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* (1962) reinforces the myth that Mexico has and still is undergoing a quasi-harmonious whitening process. Mexicans of African descent in this novel appear as mestizos oblivious of their African heritage and convinced that "the whiter the better."

La muerte belongs to the narrative that helped forge a mistaken national identity. It is part of the discourse on nation produced during the cultural phase of the Mexican Revolution. The novel depicts and perpetuates stereotypes of Mexicans of African lineage. It posits that for black characters to be rebellious, or to show intelligence, they have to be whitened. *La muerte* deliberately ignores the fact that black Africans from the beginning of the slave trade started to revolt, as in the case of the maroon Yanga in Veracruz, the very home state of the protagonist of the novel. Carlos Fuentes' story omits the fact that if black

Africans of the diaspora and their daughters and sons have survived in Mexico, it is not due to miscegenation, but in spite of it. It is due, in fact, to their very intelligence and inner strength.

The protagonist of the novel, Artemio Cruz, is born in Cocuya, Veracruz, near the principal Mexican port of entry for black African slaves, and the main point of arrival for black African cultures as well. Artemio Cruz is raised until the age of fourteen in an Afro-Mexican environment (285).

La muerte is the self-portrait of the *pelado* (276) Artemio Cruz, a dying 71-year-old self-made Mexican of African decent who does not identify with his Afro roots. He is the bastard son of a certain "Isabel Cruz, Cruz Isabel" a mulatto woman whose true name, we are given the impression, is unknown (314).

Cruz's father, Atanasio Menchaca, is an abusive *criollo* who, during the Porfiriato, had been a powerful landowner and a born leader. Artemio is six feet tall and weighs about 174 pounds (247). He has "pronounced features" (41) graying curly hair (16, 251) that once was black (314). He has very dark skin like the skin color of his son (168). He has green eyes that project a cold and unwavering look (171), an energetic mouth, wide forehead, protruding cheekbones (149) and thick lips (115).

Artemio becomes Lieutenant Colonel during the armed phase of the Revolution (1910-1920). Through a marriage with a *criolla* after the end of the armed conflict he turns out to be first a landowner and administrator, and later, a newspaper magnate and a millionaire by brokering government concessions to foreigners.

Artemio Cruz feels he has conquered "decency" for his children. He believes they will thank him for making them "respectable people," for not being satisfied "with living and dying in a shack of Negros" (276). This statement brings the white aesthetic in the novel to the surface. In *La muerte*, Mexicans of African lineage are narrated as backward, submissive, tame and servile. They are caricatured as simple, as jungle beings (302) with an endless sexual appetite (279, 288, 289), as possessing an innate musicality (288), and as having a natural predisposition to relax (287). This becomes especially striking if one considers that *criollos* are portrayed as people with history, identity, feelings, ideals, and even chivalrous at the moment of defeat, a perception that echoes Samuel Ramos' belief in the superiority of *criollo* culture. The Spaniards are capable of understanding, and of giving body and soul for family and beliefs.

In its structure, *La muerte* differs from prior Mexican novels. However, what does not change is the essence of what is being transmitted. In other words, the way of telling the story has changed. However, what is being said about Mexican *mestizaje*, and in particular about its Afro element, reiterates José Vasconcelos' ideology of the "cosmic race."

Therefore, *La muerte* is considered in this study as an integral piece of the discourse on nation produced during the cultural phase of the Mexican Revolution (1920-1968). Although the largest group of the general Mexican population, the mestizos, are non-white and in all probability possess a drop of black blood, *La muerte* reproduces and reinforces stereotypes of blacks in a manner found in other works produced in Mexico during the said period.

In *La muerte* the images are fragmented and colored in a "cubist" fashion.

For instance, on the first page when Artemio says:

Although I don't want to, something shines insistently next to my face; something that reproduces itself behind my closed eyelids: a fugue of black lights and blue circles. I contract my face muscles, I open my right eye and I see it reflected in the glass incrustations of a woman's purse...I am this old man with his features shattered by the irregular glass squares. (9)

Carlos Fuentes departs from the traditional linear structure. His story is told in colorful bits and pieces. He enters the reader's mind with apparently innocent cubist-like images that nevertheless reinforce preexisting symbols. Fuentes introduces new structural technology to the Mexican novel to revolutionize reader persuasion. In fact the physical and ideological description of the central character, Artemio Cruz, is made in bits and pieces throughout the novel. *La muerte* is a metaphor of Mexican *mestizaje*. Artemio's Afro roots are hard to detect. In the midst of the confusion, the reader is being persuaded that the black African characteristics of the population are still knowingly and voluntarily undergoing whitening.

Fuentes plays with time and space. He dislocates planes through a cinema-like montage of scenes. He makes the reader travel in the mind of the dying Artemio as in a movie screen. Through an interior monologue Cruz flashes in and out of our minds at break-neck speed. There are no time or space barriers. Artemio brings the past to the present at will, for instance when in one

of various memories he recalls his childhood as in a close-up scene and transports the reader to a different place in time. Past mixes with the present when Artemio comes out of his lethargy through pain and becomes aware of the presence of others in the room. The future comes to the present when Artemio foresees what is to happen. In this manner Fuentes penetrates the mind of the reader and in the place of facts he lays out his ideal world, which in turn will help develop the false memory syndrome. Thus, what never was becomes and whatever has been is dissipated out of the unconscious reader's mind. In this manner the author forges history and reinforces black stereotypes, something that will be returned to later.

According to Julio Ortega, *La muerte* is "the first product of Latin American post-modernity." Ortega interprets the novel as "a disenchanting reading of compulsive modernity" (2). This is little surprising because *La muerte* appears to be a "fresh" look at the Revolution. It seems to indict a corrupted patriarchal system and gives the impression of being the long-awaited voice of self-criticism of a decadent structure. The novel casts the illusion of denouncing the existing political structure: the institutionalized *criollo*-manipulated PRI system that from the onset of the cultural phase of the Revolution sought total control and power over the people. *La muerte* seems critical of a government, revolutionary only on paper, which in fact betrayed the Revolution's ideals and disenfranchised the majority of Mexicans (non-white people) while following closely the color line institutionalized during the colonial period.

One is forced to question the veracity of the character ascribed to a person of black African descent in Revolutionary Mexico. Had racism in Mexico subsided so much by 1920 as to allow a person of visible black African descent to rise "freely" from rags to riches? How many mestizos of visible African descent can one find as magnates in the Mexico of the first two quarters of the twentieth-century? If "the object of the novel is to tell the other version of history," as Carlos Fuentes himself has declared, would it not have been more true to life to have made the villain a *criollo*? (Güemes 1). Then why make a *pelado* or Afro-mestizo the villain? Is the novel repeating and reinforcing the myth of the "evil" nature of non-white Mexicans? Is Carlos Fuentes embodying through his character the stereotypes forged and repeated by Samuel Ramos and Octavio Paz?

In "Los hijos de la Malinche," Paz uses the word *chingar* as his foundation for an analysis of the Mexican character. Fuentes seems to do the same in *La muerte* when Artemio Cruz carries out a self-analysis through the many meanings of *chingar* and the manner in which they relate to him and his life experience (143-147). Paz finds that "the question of origin is at the secret center of Mexican anxiety and anguish" (72). A more cynical Fuentes appears to believe that the origins of *chingar*, and hence Mexican origins, are unimportant. This becomes evident when a self-reflective Artemio asks himself, "do you think that with that word you will go back to the origins? What origins?" (145). Paz recognizes that "the word *chingar*, with (all of its) multiple significations, defines a great portion of Mexican life and describes our relations with the rest of our

friends and countrymen" (71). Artemio Cruz, speaking to himself, and referring to *chingar* says, "that is your word and your word is mine, word of honor, man's word..." (143). By the time Paz is writing his essay he knows that the word *chingar* has become a badge of Mexican national identity and that its use is a way of "affirming our Mexican-ness" (68). Fuentes uses the word as the substance to explain Artemio Cruz's character and thereby makes him a prototype of the Mexican *pelado*. Paz knows that *chingar* is a "vulgar" word (67). He knows that the mestizo population is the master of its usage (67). He knows that the majority of Mexicans are mestizos. By the time he produces his persuasive essay, he should have known that the *pelados* are the daughters and sons of black Africans no matter how "integrated" or bleached out, since the sources of information were readily available since 1946 with Aguirre's *La población negra de Mexico*. But instead, Paz separates the Mexican "mystery" from the "yellow" (Asian) and "black" (African) mysteries in his introductory paragraph (59), thus echoing José Vasconcelos' Eurocentric philosophy.

Paz said that *chingar* is probably of Aztec origin (68). Most likely he wrote this because the theory fits what he wanted to say about Mexican *léperos* or *pelados*. He casts the mestizo as the offspring of Indians and Spaniards. He is incapable of seeing in *La chingada* (the raped mother) "traces of black attributes" (77). Octavio Paz provides an erroneous historical account of Mexican *mestizaje*. He deliberately omits its black African roots. In his rush to explain Mexican identity, he fails to make the connection between the *alvaradeño*, the *jarocho*, the *chinaco*, the *lépero*, or the *pelado* studied by his predecessor,

Samuel Ramos, an ardent admirer and supporter of José Vasconcelos and his *criollo* philosophy of education (Muñoz 24). In this manner Paz castrates the verb *chingar* and adds to the confusion about the origins and ethos of the Mexican *mezclas* or mestizos and some of their most important contributions to Mexican-ness.

Octavio Paz retakes Ramos' thinking and adds the language dimension to his analysis of the Mexican, but he no longer differentiates among classes as Ramos did. Paz unites all classes through the lexeme *chingar*. He makes Mexico and Mexican-ness one. Mexican-ness for Paz, embodied in the mestizo, has Indian and Spanish roots alone. What is important to point out here is that Carlos Fuentes, in *La muerte*, echoes this line of thinking as will be seen.

Fuentes carries on Ramos' and Paz's perception. Fuentes forges the *pelado* character with *chingar* as his substance and makes him the substance of *chingar* as well (143-147). He makes his character an Afro-Mexican from Veracruz. Therefore he gets closer to the origins of *chingar* and *pelado*. He gets closer than anyone ever has to making the connection that would help disclose the origins of the mestizo, his language, and his worldview, something that in all probability would help explain better the Mexican character and its gloomy sense of humor. However, Fuentes is still blinded by the black phobia and white aesthetic that blinded his predecessors. He makes Artemio Cruz an Afro-Mexican who, notwithstanding his visible Afro characteristics, the knowledge of his birth, and of having been raised in an Afro-Mexican environment until the age of fourteen, is oblivious, perhaps even ashamed—it is not a sign of decency for

him “to live and die in a Negro shack” (276)—of his black lineage and Afro cultural heritage. In contrast, Fuentes whitens Artemio Cruz’ heritage by making him especially proud of his *criollo* identity and of leaving his daughter well on the way of becoming “decent,” or white.

According to Lanin A. Gyurko, Artemio Cruz is developed as a “single character, powerful and complex enough to be convincing, not only as an individual but also as a national symbol” (30). This character, imagined by his uncle in *La muerte* as a black Moses (285), instead becomes a despicable being, immoral, greedy, and treacherous, a coward, and a corrupted man. Artemio Cruz’s character is built as a “New World conqueror, a twentieth-century Hernán Cortés” (Gyurko 34).

This 20th-century Cortés is probably a suggestion of why *pelados* should never be allowed to rise to power. Or perhaps it is a justification of why they have never achieved it. Carlos Fuentes seems to propose that *mezclas* are incapable of managing their own destiny and that, if given the opportunity, they would act as the Spaniards did. In fact he allows his reader to “see” it clearly. Through the power of the narrative and the authority he has been granted as a man of letters, Fuentes persuades his reader that something that never was “is.” Cynthia Duncan explains this power of the word when she states, “[w]hether a person holds power or lacks it, whether he is perceived to be trustworthy or deceitful, and whether he has been assigned a dominant or subordinate role by the superstructure of society are factors which have an impact on the way his words are interpreted by others” (868).

Artemio Cruz is somebody incapable of caring about high Revolutionary ideals, or country. He is a traitor. In Gyurko's words, Cruz is literally an *hijo de la chingada*: "Violation gave him life—rape of a slave woman¹⁰² by his father Anastasio Menchaca; violation pervades his life, and violation (mental and physical) characterizes his death" (35). For Gyurko, on the symbolic level, Cruz characterizes the Frozen Revolution and a nation that "slavishly imitates the value systems of European and North American nations" (39). Jerry W. Wilson expands this view: "Fuentes focuses on the fictional Cruz to epitomize the perversion of the revolution" (439).

Artemio Cruz is rich, powerful and married into a *criollo* family. However, it is made obvious that these "attributes" *per se* cannot remove the color line that marginalizes him throughout the story. He enters a marriage, where the color divide is kept and cultivated within the relationship.¹⁰³ Despite all the power Artemio Cruz has, he is incapable of freeing his conscience from the knowledge of being "the other" even at home with his wife and daughter.

The very power, impressive physique, and ruthless character given him by Fuentes so lavishly, on the one hand marks Artemio Cruz by making him stand out. On the other hand, it makes *criollos* appear more impressive, thereby mythifying them. The fact that Cruz has no black identity and feels inferior

¹⁰² Slavery was supposed to have been abolished in Mexico by 1829. However, we find the Menchacas negotiating over Lunero at six *reales*, when around 1903 (294) he is going to be taken away from them by the new imposed masters of the region (295).

¹⁰³ This type of marriage is described in Celestino Gorostiza's 1952 drama, *El color de nuestra piel* (*The Color of our Skin*).

reinforces the illusion that the whites he wishes to emulate somehow are superior.

Lunero, Artemio's uncle is a good tamed young mulatto who accepts his fate quietly (284). He is capable of accepting the sexual and physical abuse of his sister by the master. He helps her during Artemio's birth (314). By the fact that he is still there, it can be deduced that he did nothing to intervene and stayed quiet when, right after giving birth to the first son of the master, Isabel is beaten with a stick and run off the property in his presence (286, 306) by the known rapist of mulatto and Indian women (299). Lunero is so good and so incapable of running away that he invents work to support what is left of his masters' household (285, 303). He is very protective of Artemio and takes care of him for fourteen years even though, or perhaps due to the fact that Artemio is not as black as him.

Lunero is narrated as being naturally musical. He has the rhythm in him (287-288) and every afternoon sings to young Artemio the songs brought by Lunero's father from Santiago de Cuba "when the war broke out and the families moved to Veracruz along with their servants" (286). Lunero is a prisoner of fear and nostalgia, he fears the New World: the sierra, the Indians, and the plateau (302); and is nostalgic of the continent where Fuentes believes that, "one like him would be able to get lost in the jungle and say that he had returned" (302).

Artemio's mother, Isabel Cruz or Cruz Isabel, is a woman without a fixed name who appears in the narrative only as a vessel to bring another *hijo de la chingada* into the world. Although she appears fleetingly, she leaves the

impression of being nothing more than a victim, a fearful presence incapable of making a sound even at the moment of delivery.

In *La muerte*, Mexicans of African descent seem to inhabit exclusively Veracruz, and not extend beyond the sierra. The hacienda of Cocuya is full of blacks (295), "Negroid" people (289), and "... clear-eyed Mulattoes with skin the color of pine nuts," sons of the "Indian and Mulatto women that went around bearing them" (289). We learn about blacks "brought to the tropical plantations with their hair straightened by the daring Indian women that offered their hairless sexual parts as a victory redoubt over the curly haired race" (279).

In contrast to Fuentes' narration is the well-documented fact that black Africans of the diaspora were taken all over the country wherever there was mining, farming, ranching, factories, domestic work, or transportation of goods. History, interpreted through the Afro Hispanic American perspective tells us that Mexicans of African descent, the infamous *mezclas*, became a considerable proportion of today's mestizos.

The reinforcing of stereotypes does not end there. Artemio's children are mestizos of African descent as well. They are portrayed as being oblivious of their Afro root. They are ideologically whitened. In fact his daughter is shown as being happily Americanized, going shopping, eating waffles and talking about North American movie stars (22-23, 25). *La muerte* seems to suggest that corruption in Mexico is tied to miscegenation and not to the Eurocentric-*criollo* PRI government; and that *mestizaje*, of the type embodied by Artemio Cruz, had a harmful effect on the Mexican Revolution.

In conclusion, *La muerte* is a text in which modern Mexican nation is still being narrated in accordance with the "cosmic race" creed. The novel perpetuates and reinforces the myth of whitening that underlines the *negative* ideology of *mestizaje* in Mexico as in other parts of the New World. Fuentes contributes to the erasure of the path that leads to the Afro root of *positive* Mexican *mestizaje*. Just like José Vasconcelos, Samuel Ramos, José Rubén Romero, Joselito Rodríguez and Octavio Paz, among other architects of the imagined modern Mexican nation, Fuentes creates confusion about the origins of the Mexican mestizo and his culture. He forges and perpetuates black stereotypes and stereotypes of their daughters and sons. He marks blacks, mythifies whites and omits mentioning in the appropriate light Mexicans of visible African lineage who are not servile, tame, submissive and backward. Just like other Latin American writers studied by Jackson, Fuentes caricatures the image of Mexicans of visible African descent.

Conclusion

The Afro element, or black African heritage of Mexican *mestizaje* was erased from memory during the first decades of the 20th century as the modern nation was being born. The *criollo* government that called itself "revolutionary" launched a mass media campaign to Hispanicize the multicultural, multiethnic, and multilingual population. Education, the arts, and more traditional channels of persuasion, such as radio and newspapers, among others, were recruited and paid for by the government. During this campaign the Indian heritage started to be extolled, though only as something from the past, along with a supposed Spanish chivalry and love for wisdom and civilization, among other virtues. The Afro characteristics were eradicated from the ideal image of the Mexican mestizo, or "cosmic man," simply by not mentioning them.

Since about the third decade of the 16th century, Spanish became the language of the land. All business and governmental activities were conducted in Spanish, although those who spoke and wrote it well were few even among Spaniards. Nevertheless, during the colonial period, Spaniards through their European imported institutions: clergy, police, army, prisons, among others, persuaded the majority of the Mexican population of a supposed Spanish supremacy. Catholicism became a synonym for honesty and divine truth; European (particularly Spaniard) for civilization and justice; and whiteness for beauty and purity.

To believe in what the invaders thought and taught, at least publicly, became a matter of survival. Of course, believing in itself was not enough to be free from color-of-skin prejudices and social and economic distinctions. Social mobility was nearly impossible to achieve for the daughters and sons of Indians and blacks and their mixes, or the offspring of any of these with the Spaniards. The said offspring were generally bastards. For that matter, not even the legal white children of Spaniards born outside Spain could aspire to positions of control.

Immediately after the wars of independence (1810-1821), the majority of people in Mexico were, just as today, non-whites. The largest minority were the various nations of Amerindians. The second was formed by the *mezclas* (the children of the many mixes that had taken place among Indians, blacks, and Spaniards). As a matter of fact, Father José María Morelos y Pavón who became the Independence movement leader upon Father Hidalgo's death was a mulatto *pardo*, as were an unknown number of *chinaco*, or *mezcla* troops were who formed an important part of his army. A similar case was that of General Vicente *el negro* Guerrero who became president for a year before being assassinated right after independence from Spain had been won.

Father Morelos first, then General Guerrero, through the power obtained by the people, abolished slavery officially around the third decade of the 19th century. It was mandated that racial distinctions should no longer be made in official transactions or documents. These warriors believed that this action would bring equality. By the stroke of the pen the traces of the Afro heritage of

mestizos started to vanish, literally, from what today are valuable historical sources such as Church archives. It should not be hard to understand that the stigma of being the descendants of slaves weighed heavily on the population at large. After all, if one was infamous by suspicion of having black blood, it should not be surprising that the population at large soon learned to deny any ties to blackness even if it was obvious.

When the *criollos* usurped control after the Revolution of 1910-1920, the idea that mestizos were the exclusive offspring of Indians and Spaniards was ripe in the minds of the haves and have-nots alike. Those who advocated the ideology of *mestizaje* saw it as the route to unite a deeply divided nation. Those with black blood saw it as an opportunity to "cleanse" themselves. It was a matter of somehow educating, or persuading everyone to believe in the supremacy of *criollo* culture and that through *mestizaje* or whitening anyone could aspire to upward mobility and thus gain entrance into the "civilized" world.

In 1921 José Vasconcelos enters the picture as Minister of Education and begins transmitting his cosmic race myth through all possible media and thereby whitening the *mezclas* to the level of mestizos by another stroke of the pen. There is no history to be found of *mezcla* resistance to being called Indian and Spaniard only. Moreover, there is documentation of the opposite. Aguirre Beltrán (267-92) points out that many a *mezcla* wanted to pass more as Spanish than Indian and so forth.

What is interesting is the manner in which the elite, until recently, utilized literature, cinematography, and popular culture among other cultural texts to

seize and ensure their stay in power. Through these media channels the modern nation was narrated and the audiences became persuaded, with the help of self-deceit, that something that never was is. After all, having full control of the media and a strong influence on the canons insured that whatever was said was seldom against the *criollo*-controlled PRI, and the PRI safeguarded those who supported it.

The major problem found with the "cosmic race" revolutionary policy is that what was disseminated about non-white people, particularly the darker people, actually introduced, reproduced, and massively perpetuated stereotypes. It turned the members of a mainly dark population against one another, made a whole country and its people ashamed of their African heritage and propagated the whitening mentality that infects a considerable portion of Mexican mestizos up to the present. Moreover, the said stereotypes, when repeated, reinforce other subjacent symbols, thereby developing codes about visibly black Mexican mestizo-people based more on myth than reality.

As much as this may be argued as a thing of the past, the fact remains that the message contained in the works studied here, in other works mentioned, as well as in many more works all over the Americas, continues to be taught without any warning of their negative effects as far as blacks are concerned. There have been recent classes on the works of well known racists such as Domingo Fausto Sarmiento, José Henriquez Ureña and José Vasconcelos, to mention a few, taught totally ignoring the Modern Languages Association

directives about exposing the antihumanist and unscientific character of "lingering racist ideas and materials."

In 1968, immediately before the Olympic games, when the government under Gustavo Diaz Ordaz massacred an "unknown" number of student demonstrators in Tlatelolco, the country, in the words of Ilan Stavans, underwent a deep identity crisis (36). From that day on institutions began to be scrutinized deeply. The so-called revolutionary government had overstayed its welcome. For its new members, as well as for the people at large, the PRI had become a dinosaur. Mexicans began to search for their identity anew.

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