

Winter 12-14-2018

From La Costa Chica to Pasadena: Transnational Racial Politics of Afro-Mexicans

Antonio Rodriguez-Santiago
arodriq8@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.usfca.edu/thes>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rodriguez-Santiago, Antonio, "From La Costa Chica to Pasadena: Transnational Racial Politics of Afro-Mexicans" (2018). *Master's Theses*. 1150.
<https://repository.usfca.edu/thes/1150>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses, Dissertations, Capstones and Projects at USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of USF Scholarship: a digital repository @ Gleeson Library | Geschke Center. For more information, please contact repository@usfca.edu.

From La Costa Chica to Pasadena: Transnational Racial Politics of Afro-Mexicans

Antonio Rodríguez-Santiago

University of San Francisco

November 2018

Master of Arts in International Studies

From La Costa Chica to Pasadena: Transnational Racial Politics of Afro-Mexicans

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

in

INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

by **Antonio Rodríguez-Santiago**

November 20, 2018

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all members, this thesis project has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

APPROVED:

Advisor

Date

Academic Advisor

Date

Key Words

1. *Afro-Mexicans*: A term that was chosen for Afrodescendant communities in Mexico by social movement activists.
2. *Costa Chica*: A region on Mexico's Pacific Coast from Acapulco, Guerrero to Huatulco, Oaxaca.
3. *Costeños*: Native people who are from the Costa Chica region belonging to any demographic group.
4. *Mestizaje*: After the Mexican Revolution this ideology was promoted to endorse a mixed race national identity, resulting in erasure of Blackness in the Mexican consciousness.
5. *Moreno*: A term used to refer to individuals with dark or black skin color. This is considered to be less offensive than *negro*.
6. *NAFTA*: The North American Free Trade Agreement, 1994.
7. *Negro*: A term for people of African descendant. The term can be construed as offensive, inoffensive or completely neutral, depending on the context and region where it is used.
8. *Pueblo*: Group of people living in villages.

Abstract

The ethnographic research in this thesis focuses on one group of Afro-Mexicans who migrated to Pasadena, California, from Mexico's Costa Chica, on the Pacific Coast of Oaxaca and Guerrero, the area where a social movement for Afro-Mexican recognition and collective rights was founded in 1997. This study, using a framework of racial theory, examines the process of racial formation in a transnational setting, which has made this group different in many ways from the Black residents who remain in the Costa Chica. The study also considers how *mestizaje*, the Mexican national racial ideology that endorses a mixed-race society while ignoring Afro-Mexicans, has affected the racial formation that takes place in the Costa Chica and in the migrant community of Blacks now living in Pasadena. It also looks at social movement theory to assess how Afro-Mexicans have made gains in Mexico through a process of international networks, information sharing and broad alliances. The migrants in Pasadena, as part of a globalized transformation of race, have benefited from the social movement in Mexico while becoming sensitized and educated about race in different ways in their new location. The residents of this community were interviewed and through their voices, I was able to analyze and discover their changing attitudes toward race, identity, and social movement, adding new knowledge about how racial concepts are shifting as national boundaries are crossed.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my new family, Pierre and Steve, the family I chose as an adult. Without your moral support and guidance, I would never have advanced in my academic career in a foreign place. Also thanks to my biological family who have been with me through the distance; and to my many friends for their never-ending support.

Thank you to my advisor, Professor Lucía Cantero, for her guidance and patience.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|------------|
| Signature Page | <i>ii</i> |
| Key Words | <i>iii</i> |
| Abstract | <i>iv</i> |
| Acknowledgments | <i>v</i> |
| Table of Contents | <i>vi</i> |
| | |
| Preface | 1 |
| | |
| Chapter One: Introduction | 2 |
| Inspiration for This Research | |
| Research Questions and Themes | |
| Chapter Summaries | |
| | |
| Chapter Two: Literature Review | 13 |
| Whitening Discourse of <i>Mestizaje</i> | |
| Race as a Social Construct | |
| Social Movements and Transnational Migration | |
| | |
| Chapter Three: Afro-Mexicans in Pasadena, California: Portrait of a Costa Chica Community Transplanted to the U.S. | 30 |
| <i>Azúcar mi Negro: Race in the Lives of the Pasadena Costeños</i> | |

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Chapter Four: The Grassroots Organizer and The Human Rights Advocate: Two Perspectives on the Movement for Afro-Mexican Rights and Recognition in the Costa Chica of Mexico..... | 59 |
| Sergio Peñaloza Pérez | |
| Dr. Helen Patricia Peña Martínez | |
| | |
| Chapter Five: <i>La Negrada</i>: A Filmmaker And His Pioneering Effort to Bring Visibility to Afro-Mexicans on the Costa Chica..... | 69 |
| <i>La Negrada</i> : Director Jorge Pérez Solano | |
| | |
| Conclusion..... | 80 |
| Bibliography..... | 83 |

Preface

As I arrived at the intersection of Lincoln Avenue and Mariposa Street in Altadena, California, the white Sacred Heart church was visible against the green lush plants and the blue sky. The sweltering weather was unbearable. I tried to open the church's door but it was locked. I turned left toward the garden and behind it, under a tent, I saw some people by a grill. I found the right place, I thought, looking at a Black guy cleaning the grill. "*Cómo están los tacos?*" I asked the gentleman. "I am just cleaning it" was his response. I was late for the mass and obviously for the food. I went directly toward him and I asked where he was from? "Mexico" was his answer. "*La Costa?*" I asked. "José María Morelos, Oaxaca, Mexico" were his words. I jumped on and bombarded him with questions and told him about my thesis project. He was surprised and followed with me for awhile but suddenly incredulously with a wide smile he said, "You are kidding me, right?" "No!" I said. I am looking for Blacks or Afro-Mexicans from Guerrero and Oaxaca states to include them in an academic study. I knew I needed to act fast and gain his trust, so I took out of my white, canvas bag the 2016 photo book *Afro-Mexicanos Pertenencia y Orgullo* and showed it to him. His eyes were now wide-open, devouring the pictures of Black folks back home. His smile was even wider and he shouted to his friends under the tent "*Hey nos andan buscando!*" From that moment on I knew that I had found a community I had last seen some 20 years ago, in another time and another place but with the same characteristics. I have not seen another Afro-Mexican community since then. I introduced myself, and I engaged with a few others who showed interest in the project, who had stayed to clean up after the gathering

as they do religiously every Sunday after midday mass. At that moment, I felt some relief; my project was starting to take its own course.

Chapter One: Introduction

I am a native of the Costa Chica¹ in Oaxaca State and grew up around Afro-Mexicans. I always asked myself where these people were from and why they were different from my own family and were treated differently, apparently because of their appearance. They were my classmates and neighbors, and they often showed up at school without shoes or wearing clothes that were worn out. Worse, some of them never even attended school, and it was obvious they lived in poverty. There was no educational discourse on the history of Blacks in Mexico in the textbooks I read. There was a sense that at some point they were slaves but this was like a taboo, not to be talked about other than “*trabajar como negro*,” referring to the hard work once they realized. The Blacks were visible and they were part of our community, yet there was no official acknowledgement or public discourse of any kind regarding this group. Ironically, they were in plain sight, yet invisible. Their history was lost, even to many of the Afro-Mexicans themselves. While I do not think I have any African ancestors in my own family, I did feel an affinity for Blacks from my childhood experiences. In later years, after I moved to the U.S., one of my sisters married a Black man, adding another layer of curiosity to my already semi-full bag of questions about Afro-Mexicans. At first, I wondered about the Black ancestors of my brother-in law, my two nephews and my

¹ The Costa Chica is located on the Pacific Ocean, stretching from Guerrero State in the north to Oaxaca State in the south. This is where a significant portion of the Afro-Mexican population lives in Mexico and where they have lived for centuries. Another large population of Afro-Mexicans lives in Veracruz state.

niece. Like the Afro-Mexicans themselves, I had learned nothing in school about the transatlantic slave trade and only after I continued my education here in the U.S. did I discover the history of the African diaspora and the roots of my Costa Chican neighbors, some of whom, even today, still do not know where they came from.

In addition to curiosity, empathy and familiarity, I feel compelled to do this research because of my own humble background, which makes me more sensitive to the grievances and human rights of these Black communities. There was also a stigmatization of the Blacks by the larger community, who often said these Afro-Mexicans were poor because they were lazy. I wondered how these Afro-Mexicans identified themselves in their homes and family groups. Were they Mexicans like everyone else, or were they African descendants with a unique culture and history that was forgotten or hidden? Were they stained with a stigma as dark as their skin color, because of ignorance, and a long history of denial and whitening that is so ingrained in the minds of Mexicans? Ironically, the political class wanted to drown and bury Blackness, yet the past was just dormant and now seems to be coming back to haunt them. In the face of a new movement for Afro-Mexican recognition and visibility, Mexicans are now confronting their own racial politics while battling the continuing discrimination their communities face. The central questions for my study were: How does the history of *mestizaje* continue to impact Afro-Mexicans and what kind of discrimination do they face as a result of Mexico's racial politics in the past and the present? How do Afro-Mexicans identify in the Costa Chica and how does their migration to California affect these identifications as part of a new transnational racial formation? What do Afro-Mexicans know about their past and how is that knowledge

changing with transnational migration? What progress has been made by the social movement to gain rights for Afro-Mexicans and how are attitudes toward this movement changing among residents of the Costa Chica who have immigrated to Southern California?

I will now look at the central argument and themes of this research. I found that studying this transplanted, and very close-knit, Black Mexican community in Pasadena has opened a window onto the history, the culture and the current racial formation they have undertaken in a transnational setting. Those who participated in this project candidly shared not only their memories of Mexico, but also their experiences of race in the U.S. and their hopes for the future. In the process, they highlighted important issues of racial identity, racial politics and transnational migration. They unanimously and strongly state that racism and discrimination still exist in Mexico in spite of a nearly 100-year old national project of *mestizaje*, which supposedly ended racism in Mexico. They also talk of living in severe poverty in the Costa Chica, sometimes without basic infrastructure, and with limited access to government assistance, education and health care.² *Mestizaje* was successful not in eliminating racism but in erasing any trace of Blackness in the mainstream of Mexican awareness and public discourse. As an example, one participant named Hernando points out, “...Most of the people you see on television and the movies, they’re white. Like sometimes you see a Black person, it’s a comedian or a clown.”

This study will examine how one immigrant Afro-Mexican community in the U.S. views these issues of racial politics, how they view their own racial identity and

² I found no statistics to show this disparity since Afro-Mexicans were not counted until recently.

what they think of the current movement to gain full recognition, human rights and equality for Afro-Mexicans. I argue that the Afro-Mexican community in Pasadena represents a departure from the customs and ideas of the Afro-Mexicans still living in the Costa Chica; they are part of a new transnational racial formation influenced by a specific geographic space and a unique social and political environment.

I will outline my ethnographic methodology for this research; first, in terms of how I located the community I studied; second, how I identified individual interlocutors to interview; and, third, how I interacted with these interviewees in both a semi-structured interview setting as well as in very informal social events I attended, to which I was invited by those who welcomed me to the Pasadena Afro-Mexican community.

First, locating a group of Afro-Mexicans for this study presented a challenge because there is no Afro-Mexican group listed on the Internet in California. There was a past documentary film³ and a few newspaper articles focusing on Afro-Mexican migrant communities and these led me to Pasadena, California as a possible location for this study. I made dozens of phone calls to the Costa Chica trying to locate specific contact information for immigrants to California, and I sent numerous emails to academics and cultural groups in both Mexico and the United States. All of this failed to lead me to any Afro-Mexican individual or family, so I decided to travel to Pasadena from San Francisco to interview one educator, Daniel Cendejaz-Méndez, who appeared in the documentary film. He is Afro-Mexican, but not from the Costa Chica and he knew another teacher who was in contact with Afro-Mexicans in Pasadena. However, this other teacher had not yet responded with any information. It became clear that I needed to be in Southern

³ *Invisible Roots: Afro-Mexicans in Southern California*, 2015, was a film project by Tiffany Walton, a student the University of Southern California.

California in order to find a group I could study. After arriving in Pasadena and interviewing Cendejuz, I decided to find the Catholic church that was mentioned in a newspaper article about Afro-Mexicans in Southern California,⁴ and that initial encounter with the Afro-Mexican community of Pasadena is what I describe in the preface of this study. Alberto was the first person I talked with and he immediately introduced me to Alma.

Second, relating to the individuals I located, meeting Alberto and Alma opened new doors to other member of the community, and through the snowball method, I was eventually able to locate sixteen different individuals to interview, and nine of those interviews will be presented as ethnographic oral histories in a later chapter. After conducting the first interviews, these interlocutors were happy to share the names of their family members and friends who might also want to participate in this study. After learning I am a Mexican from the Costa Chica (though not Afro-Mexican), they were happy to help, and told me that every step toward recognition for their communities was helpful, including academic studies. After a few days, the teacher who Cendejuz had contacted on my behalf was able to offer some names and phone numbers, and that opened even more doors.⁵ All of the interviewees identified as Black or *moreno*, and added new knowledge, through their experiences of transnational racial formation, to the racial framework outlined in the literature (Fanon 1952; Wade 2010; Joseph 2015; Lewis 2012; Vinson 2018). They almost all came to the U.S. from two adjacent pueblos in the State of Oaxaca: José María Morelos, and the much smaller town of Cerro Blanco. Some

⁴ “A Real Blended Family,” by John L. Mitchell, published April 13, 2005 in *The Los Angeles Times*.

⁵ In trying to get a good variety of interviews, I selected people who were both male and female and a variety of ages, ranging from 30 to 76. The participants were chosen based on their willingness to cooperate more than their phenotype. They ranged in color and phenotype from light-skinned to very dark, with varying degrees of African-related facial features.

had left the Costa Chica at a young age, while others spent most of their lives there. Two of the interviewees, Santos and Andrés, had been political leaders in their hometowns and were able to offer first hand accounts of racial politics in Mexico, while Andrés and another interviewee, Hernando, had direct connections to the movement for Afro-Mexican rights. Their participation recalled the research into social movements by scholars in that field (Hanchard 1999; Muñoz 2006; Paschel 2016) in terms of alliances, international coalitions, information dissemination and the political conditions for social movements.

And finally, in terms of my interactions with the community, I conducted interviews in the homes of the participants over a 10-day period at the end of August 2018. I was warmly welcomed into their homes and was offered food and drink, which I declined. There was sometimes a challenge finding quiet locations to make audio recordings, as children were often running through the apartments and people were in and out of the kitchen getting food, so the recordings were sometimes interrupted. These interlocutors were generous with their time and hospitality, especially considering each of them had already spent a hard day at work and agreed to meet me in the evening. Most of the interviewees lived within a few blocks of each other in the same Pasadena neighborhood, which I will describe in more detail in a later chapter.

The ethnographic research was not limited to interviews; I was also invited to attend two weekend birthday parties held by members of this Afro-Mexican community, and the conversations I had with the residents during those events were also useful in understanding the people, their attitudes about race, and their experiences with migration from Mexico to the U.S. and how this influenced the process of transnational racial

formation which they are experiencing (Joseph 2015). These less formal interactions provided important insight and context to understanding the dynamic of race formation through transnational migration.

My interviews and discussions covered a wide range of topics. Part of my methodology is to view and analyze the interlocutors' responses through theoretical frameworks that align with the central themes that emerged, including racial theory, social movement theory and race as a social construct. Before examining the literature in detail, I will outline here the three central themes of this research. First is the whitening discourse of *mestizaje* and the discrimination it causes. In terms of whitening, this study found a racial self-identity in which Blackness is often denied or kept at a distance, an attitude that has existed traditionally in the Costa Chica, but is now evolving into a greater acceptance of Blackness in the Pasadena community. While these participants recognize that whiteness is still preferred under the lasting influence of *mestizaje*, at least they now question why that should be true. Even though *mestizaje* sees "...whitening as the path to the future," (Lewis, 2102: 285), these residents of Pasadena accept themselves as Blacks or Afro-Mexicans and are proud of that identification.

In terms of racial discrimination resulting from that whitening discourse of *mestizaje*, the participants all agree racism is still a major problem, even more in Mexico than in the U.S, with darker skinned people remaining the targets of discrimination. The Afro-Mexican community I worked with in Pasadena agreed race and color play a major role, along with social class, in the areas of economic status, access to education and health care, spending on infrastructure in their communities, opportunities for employment, and political representation. Many of them focused especially on

education, saying they were denied opportunities in Mexico, but now are seeing doors open in the U.S., especially for their children.

Race as a social construct is a second major theme of this study. In the early days of Colonial rule, a structuralist system of racial belief, the *casta* system, was introduced in New Spain (Vinson 2018). It reflected attitudes that were common in many countries at the time, and especially in territories under colonial domination, that race was a biologically determined and inescapable and that it determined a person's position in society. Franz Boas was the first to suggest race is actually not fixed but variable depending on social, historical and geographic conditions. In other words, it was a social construct. This thinking corresponded to scientific findings that skin color and phenotype have no connection to intellect or other qualities and that, basically, race does not exist in biological terms (Wade 2010, 12). After the war of Independence and the Revolution in Mexico, *mestizaje* placed a political interpretation on race and this racial politics has remained fossilized in Mexico's thinking about race ever since, in spite of the modern shift in the racial discourse. The Blacks of the Costa Chica have long been adapting to survive; and, in the process they have constructed race culturally in the shadow of *mestizaje*, but in a way that is shaped by their own customs, culture, history and geography, creating a strong sense of community. I argue that these characteristics of the Costa Chica Blacks help define them as a distinct culture, apart from Mexican *mestizos*, indigenous people, and white people.

Finally, social movements and transnational migration are also important themes in this study. Viewed together, they have greatly affected the people of the Costa Chica. In terms of social movements, since the 1990s a social movement in the Costa

Chica has been growing to build awareness of Black identity in Mexico. This movement was started with the influence of a Catholic priest from Trinidad, Father Glyn Jemmott, who became the pastor in El Ciruelo, Oaxaca, one of the 29 predominantly Black *pueblos* in the Costa Chica (Vaughn 2008, 1). Father Glynn created a group called Mexico Negro AC, along with activist Sergio Peñaloza Pérez (who I interviewed for this research project), which is aimed at fighting for human rights and constitutional recognition of Blacks in these remote and forgotten communities.

Before arriving in Pasadena, I read literature about Blacks in the Costa Chica not accepting the narrative of “*La Cultura*” (Lewis 2012)⁶ because it did not represent the residents’ understanding of themselves or the way they identify. Many were said to be cautious or skeptical of these efforts (Vaughn 2005, 56; Lewis 2012, 156; Jerry 2013, 4). Laura Lewis pointed out that when leaders of the movement talked about African cultural elements in their communities, one woman said, “...We’re Mexicans. We don’t want to be from Africa,” in this way rejecting “a place that is meaningless to them” (Lewis 2012, 164). Their culture and their customs were locally sited and their sense of place centered on the Costa Chica. However, one surprising result of my research is that Afro-Mexicans in Pasadena—in a new process of racial formation—seem to have a wider acceptance than their families and friends back home of the social movement that is fighting for their rights.⁷

In terms of transnational race formation, re-negotiating race in the new space of the U.S. is an important element of political consciousness in the Pasadena Afro-Mexican community. The immigrants bring certain ideas about race to the U.S. with them, and

⁶ The term “*La Cultura*” includes outside intellectuals like Father Glynn who try to inspire Black activism.

⁷ They even had plans for creating a local civil organization in Pasadena, which they called “*Organization Afro-Mexicana*” which right now is going through some difficulties and is in a dormant period.

then they gain a new understanding of race as a result of living in the U.S. Eventually, they will return to Mexico with their transformed concepts of race, and bring further change to their original home environment (Joseph 2015, 2). Through various interviews, I will examine not only the racial formation process taking place in Pasadena, but also the social movement in Mexico, how it began and where it is going.

Another transnational element is that in 2009, Father Glyn visited the church in Altadena, California, where I was first able to meet some members of community profiled in this study. Glyn spoke at a Sunday Mass there, encouraging people to stand up for their Blackness, human rights and future. He said, “If you have water and you want to get the water to the roots of the plant, you have to carry it there” (Mitchell 2008, 3). In addition, some of those interviewed for this project hosted Father Glyn for discussions and informal visits during the time he was in their community. Many of the interlocutors mentioned Father’s Glyn’s visit; his influence appears to have energized the community around racial awareness and activism.

This ethnographic research project also found that knowledge of the diaspora and slavery is increasing among the migrants in Pasadena as a result of their transnational migration. Most of the participants in this study knew little or nothing about slavery or the diaspora before leaving Mexico.⁸ Now that they live a double diaspora, descended from slaves but now relocated to the U.S, all of them are aware of the African diaspora and accept it. I will explore the causes and influences that have awakened them to their African heritage.

⁸ Laura Lewis found this to be true in her ethnographic work in the village of San Nicolas, Guerrero, where “There is no historical memory of slavery in the community and almost no knowledge of Africa” (Lewis 2012, 4).

This study is organized as follows: After this introduction, I will examine in Chapter 2 the theories and arguments in the literature surrounding Afro-Mexicans, highlighting significant arguments and diverging views among scholars. Chapter 3 will present an overview of the Afro-Mexican community that I studied in Pasadena, and will feature the profiles, voices and stories of the participants themselves. They express themselves openly and generously, discussing topics that are sometimes painful to address. They are the heart and soul of this investigation. Chapter 4 discusses the social movement in Mexico fighting for human rights and recognition (not only for Blacks of the Costa Chica, but Afro-Mexicans in general). This chapter will focus on interviews I conducted by phone from Mexico with Sergio Peñaloza Pérez, one of the founders of Mexico Negro AC, the original civil organization formed to promote Black awareness in the Costa Chica and awareness about these Blacks in the larger Mexican society. Also in this chapter is presented an interview with Dr. Helen Patricia Peña Martínez. She is a top official of the public autonomous agency Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CNDH), which has worked alongside residents and activists to push for recognition for Afro-Mexicans. Chapter 5 will focus on Jorge Pérez Solano and his new feature film about Afro-Mexicans which was filmed in the Costa Chica with local Black residents playing all the roles. Solano's film, *La Negraida*, created a bit of controversy over racial terms and stereotypes, although his goal, according to my interview with him on Skype, was to bring recognition, empowerment and equality to these communities through the culture and the media. Finally, I will present conclusions based on the analysis of the study.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The literature that is relevant to this study can be divided according to the main themes addressed in this study: 1) the whitening discourse of *mestizaje*, Mexico's modern ideology of race; 2) race as a social construct, influenced by history, culture and politics; 3) Social movements and transnational migration, including the current effort to gain better recognition, representation and equality for the Blacks of the Costa Chica.

Whitening Discourse of *Mestizaje*

In Mexico's Post-Revolutionary period, the early 20th Century, *mestizaje* was Mexico's effort at nation building with the goal of unifying the people and seeking modernity. *Mestizaje* was offered as the only vehicle to form and shape Mexico's identity and to move forward as a nation (Vasconcelos, 1925). However, the whitening discourse contained in *mestizaje* has roots that go back to the Spanish Conquest, and many authors have focused on this historical perspective. To start at the beginning, Blacks were part of the earliest Spanish expeditions, serving as soldiers, cooks and auxiliaries (Vinson 2018, 6). Bobby Vaughn quotes Aguirre Beltrán as estimating there were six Blacks who came with Hernán Cortéz to Mexico in 1519, including the first slave, Juan Cortéz (Vaughn 2008). The numbers of Blacks increased dramatically when the Spanish began importing slaves from Africa to provide labor after foreign diseases decimated the indigenous people. It is estimated the indigenous population declined by six million people in the fifty-one years following the invasion of Cortéz, and to fill this need for labor the Spanish imported about 300,000 to 500,000 Africans by 1810 (Vincent 1994, 257), at one point vastly outnumbering the Spanish. Ben Vinson III, in his book *Before Mestizaje*, outlines the racial dilemma faced by the Spanish elite, with their beliefs

in white superiority, especially after the Spanish began mixing with indigenous people and Blacks. He argues that the *casta* system, although it was informal and flexible, was a way for the Spanish to protect their own status and to control the population through a system of racial hierarchy (Vinson 2018, 1). Ted Vincent calls it a plan to “...divide and conquer the people of Mexico” (Vincent 1994, 257). The Spanish declared themselves to be *gente de razón*, or the people of reason, while all others were considered inferior (Vinson 2018, 3). Later, Blacks played a major role in fighting for Independence from Spain beginning in 1810. Ted Vincent argues that this was not only a war for independence, but for the Blacks who were fighting, it was also a social movement (Vincent 1994, 257). He writes, “For the darker peoples the revolution [War of Independence] spoke of equal opportunity and social integration” (Vincent 1994, 259). At the end of the war, slavery and the *casta* system were abolished, but as Sue points out, “Although the caste system was abandoned, the value placed in whiteness remained” (Sue 2013, 11). The idea of white superiority remained through the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz, who was driven out of office by the Mexican Revolution of 1910 (Vaughn 2013, 229). This led to the ideology of *mestizaje* in an international age of what Vaughn calls “scientific racism” (Vaughn, 2013, 228).

After Independence and the Revolution, the goal was to unify a nation of mixed race people. José Vasconcelos, Minister of Education in the 1920s, popularized and promoted *mestizaje* as a way to mix of all the races into what he called the “Cosmic Race,” a superior race that would be better off than any other population worldwide. In his main essay promoting *mestizaje*, Vasconcelos called for a new “cosmic race” but denigrated the existing races, especially Blacks. He described Blacks as being “...eager

for sensual joy, intoxicated with dances and unbridled lust.” He contrasted that image to “...the clear mind of the White.” (Vasconcelos 1925, 22). He even notes that some see Blacks as “...a sort of link nearer the monkey than the blond man” (Vasconcelos 1925, 33). In the new “superior” race that Vasconcelos envisioned “...the Black will be redeemed...step by step, by voluntary extinction...” (Vasconcelos 1925, 32). The result was contradictory to what was intended: *Mestizaje* was supposed to unite the Mexican people, but in reality it further divided them. Many recent scholars (Vaughn 2005, 52; Vinson and Restall, 2009, 4; Jones 2013, 1567; Sue 2013, 16) agree that, instead of bringing up and celebrating each individual group, *mestizaje* backfired and the Black population was forgotten along with its human rights to a point that today Mexico does not recognize Black identities under its constitution (Constitution)⁹ and Blacks are forced to “make do with what has historically been allotted to them” (Dill and Amador 2014, 97). Hernandez Cuevas writes that Blacks “...were eradicated from the ideal image of Mexican *mestizo*, or ‘cosmic man,’ simply by not mentioning them” (Hernandez 2001, 145). Vinson and Restall point out “Blacks were literally written out of the national narrative” (Vinson and Restall 2009, 4).

After Black populations were “erased” (Hernandez 2001, ii; Jones 2013, 1) from the Mexican consciousness by *mestizaje*, Afro-descendent Mexicans were again highlighted briefly in 1946 by anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán who conducted a thorough ethnographic research in the Costa Chica region, along the coast of Mexico’s Guerrero and Oaxaca states (Aguirre 1946). He found that there were large Black

⁹ The Mexican Constitution states: “The nation is multicultural, based originally on its indigenous peoples, described as descendants of those inhabiting the country before colonization and that preserve their own social, economic, cultural and political institutions, or some of them.” There is no similar mention of Afro-descendent Mexicans (Government).

communities living in remotes areas, which were disconnected from the *mestizo* and general population and were unknown to most Mexicans. However, he seemed to be recognizing these communities while at the same time claiming they were on a path toward assimilation and *mestizaje* (Vinson and Restall 2009, 5). He assumed whitening was taking place, which follows the thinking about *mestizaje* at that time. He believed the Black population would eventually “bleach out” and integrate into the larger community (Hernandez 2001, 24). Aguirre later complained that his work failed to attract further attention or scholarship to Afro-Mexicans (Aguirre 1972, 11). He noted in 1972, in a new prologue to his 1946 book, that his original work represented a “...violent contradiction to what was believed before” (*una violenta contradicción a lo que con anterioridad se sostenía...*) and that, because of this, it was difficult for most Mexicans to accept his work and to realize the Black contribution to Mexican society (Aguirre 1972, 9).

Bobby Vaughn writes that because of *mestizaje*, “Blackness and Mexican-ness exist in an uneasy tension in Mexico...” (Vaughn, 2005, 49). And he argues that:

...Two separate discourses of Blackness arise. One discourse exists in the Costa Chica, where Blackness is ubiquitous, taken for granted, and permeates people’s daily lives. The other discourse...I observe in Mexico City where Blacks are almost never seen and where most people have no idea there are Blacks in Mexico at all (Vaughn 2005, 49).

This highlights the way race in Mexico is locally situated as well as the importance people in the Costa Chica place on their racial and cultural difference.

In addition, scholars have found that the people in the Costa Chica have little or no awareness of their own history of the diaspora. This is because of the “strategic amnesia” (Weltman-Cisneros and Méndez 2013, 143) about Blacks imposed by *mestizaje*; the resulting lack of educational opportunities afforded to people of color; the

isolation of the Afro-Mexican communities in the Costa Chica; and the historic lack of recognition of Mexico's African roots. Bobby Vaughn writes, "...Most Afro-Mexicans don't have a clear idea as to their origins...they don't see themselves as diasporic, African-derived people..." (Vaughn 2005, 54). The lack of a public discourse in schools about Black history is one factor in the Costa Chica that results in this lack of awareness of the diaspora. And, according to Telles, et al, skin color itself is related to how many years of schooling a person receives. They found that "darker skin color was negatively and directly related to schooling" in all eight Latin American countries they studied, including Mexico (Telles, et al 2015, 39). "Progressively darker persons," the article concluded, "consistently exhibited greater educational penalties" (54). Black self-identification, considered separately, did not translate into a "statistically significant schooling disadvantage" in any country except Brazil; however, the authors stated, "This could be due to some dark-skinned respondents identifying in 'lighter' categories..." on census questions (53).¹⁰ The desire for whitening among Blacks could account for some people claiming they are *mestizo* instead of *negro* or Afro-Mexican on census questions.

Vaughn argues that while the *Costeños*¹¹ do not know the history of their ancestors and how they came to Mexico, they do have a sense of Blackness, because it sets them apart from their indigenous and *mestizo* neighbors. Vaughn says that although *mestizaje* has "silenced" Blackness, on a local scale in the Costa Chica Blackness is an identity that survived, even though it is affected by *mestizaje*.

¹⁰ In Mexico, the first ever-count of Afro-Mexicans took place in a national survey in 2015. It showed that 1.2% of Mexicans self identify as Afro-Mexican or Afro-descendent. Based of the official population of Mexico in 2015, this totals approximately 1.44 million Afro-Mexicans (INEGI.org.mx).

¹¹ *Costeño* is another name for the people of the Costa Chica. They often self-identify using this term.

Jennifer A. Jones agrees that while Blackness is largely excluded, as a result of *mestizaje*, from the Mexican racial ideology, a strong sense of Black identity survives in the rural areas of the Mexican coast. Jones writes that, “...racial identity for Afro-Mexicans varies and is shaped by local, regional and transnational contexts and interactions.” She argues that this invisibility and marginalization “have personal and structural consequences for their well-being” (Jones 2013, 1565). Guillermo Trejo offers strong evidence that race leads to discrimination, poverty and denial of services, which can clearly affect the well-being of Blacks (Trejo 2016). His argument is that race plays an important role, alongside class, in determining the “life chances of Mexicans” (16), and that Mexicans need to recognize this. He writes that it is widely believed *mestizaje* “eroded racial differences,” (1) but that:

...The persistence of poverty and social inequalities in Mexico is intimately linked to the persistence of discrimination based on race and skin tone...Although the language of race and skin tone is socially tabooed in Mexico, the reality is that individual physical appearance drives Mexican social interactions, private economic exchanges, allocation of public resources and political participation (Trejo 2016, 12).

Trejo calls this “a ‘giant elephant in the living room’ of Mexican society” (12).

Researchers in the Costa Chica have also found that because of the whitening discourse of *mestizaje*, there is often a spatial and temporal distancing by Afro-descendants from others with similar racial mixtures and phenotypes. Bobby Vaughn did extensive fieldwork in the Costa Chica from the 1990s to the present (Vaughn 2005, 2013). When questioning locals about how they describe themselves in terms of color, he found a high level of spatial and temporal distancing from Black identity, which was also noticed by other authors (Lewis 2012, 7; Jerry 2013, 12). In terms of spatial distancing, residents who had an Afro-Mexican phenotype often directed Vaughn to the next village,

saying that is where to find the pure Blacks. They insisted their own community was not Black, or least not Black enough to conduct any racial or cultural research. As for temporal distancing, *Costeños* often claim pure Blackness is a historic concept, and that for them, Blackness has been diluted by time. They claimed their *pueblos* used to be Black but now are more mixed with the indigenous population, and now are *mestizo* (Vaughn 2013, 232). This relates to the research question of whether a new kind of racial formation is causing Costa Chicans to embrace Blackness, instead of keeping a distance from it, as documented by earlier authors.

Other scholars who have written about whitening include Christina Sue, who argue the ideology of *mestizaje* is full of contradictions in Mexico because “On the surface, the *mestizaje* discourse appears to challenge notions of white superiority; in fact, it was touted as a great homogenizing and equalizing force.” However, even when the idea of brown skin was emphasized as a national identity “...the white phenotype was (and still is) very much prized” (Sue 2013, 18). Here the negative consequences of *mestizaje* ideology and its stigmatization is not only fossilized in the white and *mestizo* populations but also in the consciousness of the Black populations of the Costa Chica.

The Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla argues that the Mesoamerican civilization is an undeniable force visible in contemporary Mexican life. Bonfill writes, “A basic characteristic of every colonial society is that the invading group, with a different culture from the dominated, ideologically affirms its immanent superiority in all areas of life and denies and excludes the culture of those colonized” (Bonfil 1996, xvi). This reference to the Spanish conquest and the mistreatment and subjugation that the natives experienced is a negative legacy that is still present not only

in indigenous communities in Mexico, but also in Black communities. Bonfil calls “the imaginary Mexico” a Mexico that is shaped and molded by Western frameworks, clashing with “*Mexico Profundo*,” a “Mesoamerican” Mexico “...that keeps resisting, appealing to diverse strategies, depending on the scheme of domination to which it is subjected. It is not a passive, static world, but rather, one that lives in permanent tension” (xvii). And this is manifested in the scattered Black communities in the Costa Chica which have survived centuries of marginalization and invisibility, after basically being abandoned by the state. Here is where racial identity is formed by choice or by force, and Afro-Mexicans consciously or unconsciously have gone through changes that have kept them together in close-knit communities, a strategy essential for their survival.

The peoples of *Mexico Profundo* [Blacks by extension] continually create and re-create their culture, adjust it to changing pressures, and reinforce their own, private spheres of control. They take foreign cultural elements and put them at their service; they cyclically perform their collective acts that are a way of expressing and renewing their own identity. They remain silent or they rebel, according to strategies refined by centuries of resistance (Bonfill 1997, xvii).

This quote also points to the personal agency for racial formation as well as illustrating race as a social construct, which is a body of literature, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

Tania S. Pashel writes in her observations and studies of indigenous and African populations in Colombia and Brazil that due to the whitening discourse of *mestizaje*, an “intentional process of cultural genocide and violent assimilation” was the goal. “Ultimately, though, these ideas were not drummed up solely within Latin America, but rather reflected increasingly ‘scientific’ thinking in Europe in the early part of the twenty century...Such conceptions equated European culture and blood with modernity and portrayed African and Indigenous peoples as inherently backwards”

(Paschel 2016, 6). Paschel also points out the main contradiction of *mestizaje*: “...the irony of constructing a raceless nation through the deeply racialized process of mixing ‘races’” (Paschel 2016, 6).

Perceptions of minorities as backward is also part of Mariana Mora’s argument. In writing about the criminalization of the 43 mostly indigenous students who were kidnapped and murdered in Ayotzinapa, Mexico, in 2014, Mora writes that the Mexican “social imaginaries” perpetuate the myth of white superiority, which considers “indigenous regions as inherently backward, violent, and ingrained with cultural deficiencies” (Mora 2017, 67). The students who were attacked were perceived by state authorities and police to be dangerous because of their color—they are “stereotypically considered to form part of drug gangs; that is to say, poor, brown, young, and male” (68). This same attitude of devaluing the lives of dark skinned people has clearly affected the Afro-Mexicans in the Costa Chica, who face continued marginalization, discrimination and denial of services.

The question remains whether social movements for Black equality can overcome the white preference that is part of *mestizaje* and other racial political ideas in the world. Frantz Fanon would seem to argue that they can succeed. Fanon makes it clear the “fact of Blackness,” and the idea of white superiority, is a condition imposed on Black people which they need to confront. In response to this, Fanon writes, “I resolved, since it was impossible for me to get away from an *inborn complex*, to assert myself as a BLACK MAN. Since the other hesitated to recognize me, there remained only one solution: to make myself known” (Fanon 1952, 87). The Afro-Mexicans of the Costa Chica appear to be engaged in a transnational project of making themselves known.

Race As a Social Construct

The “The Father of American Anthropology,” Franz Boas (1858-1942) argues “that the meanings signified by skin color or ‘race’ are culturally constructed,” saying that each group in its own time and geographical environment, designates and gives meaning to physical differences “Including bone structure, eye shape, nose shape, hair texture, lip size skin color.” So these markers are “based not in nature, but rather in culture” (Roland 2011, 6).

In terms of self-identity, earlier researchers found a notable fluidity among Afro-Mexicans about who they are, and what they should call themselves in racial terms (Vaughn 2013, 228; Jerry 2013, 20; Lewis 2012, 169). Some found the locals prefer to call themselves *morenos* (Weltman-Cisneros and Méndez 2013, 145; Jerry 2013, 52), a less derogatory way to refer to people with darker skin. They also found people who were comfortable calling themselves Black; however, all the participants agreed that the term Afro-Mexican is not one that was used in Mexico until recently.¹²

As Laura Lewis writes in *Chocolate and Corn Flour*—an ethnography of Afro-Mexicans in Guerrero, many of whom migrated to North Carolina—“...Race is socially constructed around local knowledge, history and politics and...is deployed contextually toward different ends and with different meanings” (Lewis 2012). Christina Sue agrees, arguing that the fundamental contradictions of *mestizaje* create an “entanglement of interconnected dynamics that surround race and color in Mexico.” She writes that

¹² Leaders of social movements (especially Father Glyn), academia, and government officials had disagreements with Costa Chica residents over the use of the term Afro-Mexican because the locals wanted to call themselves *negros* (Hernandez Diaz 2018, 23). However, this seems to be the descriptive form of *negros*. In the “language of group categories,” (Vaughn 2013, 231) Vaughn noted, “...Blackness has been stigmatized to the extent that the unadulterated embrace of that identity would have to challenge deeply ingrained stereotypes” (232).

Mexicans are faced with “negotiating race and racism...crafting a racial identity and making sense of their everyday experiences within a complex web of ideological contradictions” (Sue 2013, 5). Peter Wade, in his book *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*, argues that both race and ethnicity are social constructs and he accepts the “consensus” that race is more physically defined, while ethnicity is more cultural. But he goes beyond that to point out race does not really exist because science has shown everyone is basically the same, regardless of skin color or physical features (Wade 2010, 12). Wade writes, “...The term Black has no simple referent, even in the Americas: its meaning varies according to context” (13). Also, Wade argues that ethnicity is not just about culture, but also about a culture rooted in a place, a fixed geographical point of focus or origin. Wade says ethnicity “tends to use a language of place” (Wade 2010, 16). In this sense, the Afro-Mexicans can establish they have a unique culture (Hooker 2014, 291), by pointing to their historic attachment to place, the Costa Chica. Even if they were not the first ones to live there, they were there even before the Mexican state was born.

Social Movements and Transnational Migration

The movement for Afro-Mexican recognition has been growing along with similar movements elsewhere in Latin America. Beginning in 1997, a series of meetings have been held every year in different parts of the Costa Chica, organized by Mexico Negro AC and other civil organizations, to raise awareness of the need for Black rights and recognition. As Kymlicka and Norman argue, citizenship is opening to minorities in different parts of the world since the 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union. From that point, the authors argue, democracies were forced, because of a growing spotlight on

human rights, to pay more attention to “ethno-cultural diversity” (Kymlicka and Norman 2000, 3). If minorities’ rights are not addressed, the authors state, “the result can be serious damage to people’s self respect and sense of agency” (5). How these rights are achieved is the subject of Juliet Hooker’s article “Indigenous Inclusion/Black Exclusion: Race, Ethnicity and Multicultural Citizenship in Latin America.” Hooker points out that that indigenous groups in Latin America have been much more successful than Blacks in gaining new collective rights. She argues “...the main criterion used to determine the recipients of collective rights in Latin America has been the possession of a distinct cultural group identity” (Hooker 2014, 291). Whether the Blacks of the Costa Chica have a distinct cultural identity linked to Africa has been a point of conflict for two prominent scholars in this field, Aguirre Beltrán and Laura A. Lewis. In his field studies in the 1940s, Aguirre Beltrán studied marriage rituals, religion, and architecture in the Costa Chica and found African roots to these cultural traits. For example, he found that the traditional (now rarely seen) round houses in the Costa Chica were “a cultural retention of African origins...” (Lewis 2102, 134). Aguirre was an associate of Northwestern University Professor Melville Herskovits who studied African influences in New World culture. Lewis argues that Aguirre was overly influenced by Herskovits and found African connections in the Costa Chica where they did not really exist. She writes that Aguirre went to great lengths “to tease Africanisms out of local practices” (Lewis 2012, 130). She claims Aguirre’s writings contained “leaps of logic” and “...revealed more about Herskovits’s influences than about local culture” (Lewis 2012, 132). Lewis argues most of these cultural artifacts were also seen in nearby states and often came from indigenous groups in Mexico, not from Africa (Lewis 2012, 134).

In another divergence of opinion, Bobby Vaughn disagrees with Lewis on a different argument she makes, that residents of the Costa Chica were distrustful of outsiders who came to the Costa Chica to organize Blacks. Lewis writes that residents of the town she studied, San Nicolas, Guerrero “...show scant interest in the politics of multiculturalism” and that local organizers think the local residents are “‘uncooperative,’ if not downright hostile” (Lewis 2012, 9). Lewis quotes one local Black woman as saying, “Whites come to take pictures to make fun of us.” Some residents feel they are being used so that outsiders can benefit, either by selling photos or writing papers that bring profit and recognition to the authors, but do nothing for the local communities (Lewis 2012, 152). These outside interests “valorize” or “romanticize” Blacks but do not “ameliorate their living conditions” (156).¹³ However, Vaughn rejects Lewis’s idea that Mexican *Costeños* feel used and alienated by social organizers and outsiders. Vaughn writes:

While these Black revitalization efforts have been criticized as the products of outside indoctrination and agitation by Black “culture workers” with their own agendas...growing numbers of Afro-Mexicans are finding resonance with these new ways of living a Black identity...These movements have not turned the Costa Chica into a hotbed of Afrocentric political activity. What they have done is to advance a different idea of Black identity (Vaughn 2013, 235).

Vaughn endorses the idea of a new Black identity emerging through a social movement on the Costa Chica.

Tianna S. Paschel argues that grassroots movements for Black rights can succeed given the right conditions. She analyzes campaigns for collective rights for Blacks in

¹³ This is a feeling that the people are being exploited, which is similar to the way Christopher Loperena describes tourist development in the Garifuna regions of Honduras. He writes, “Folkloric representation of blackness may be attractive to visitors, but the presence of black bodies...must be carefully managed and controlled to ensure the safety of the tourists and the ‘authentic’ quality of the touristic experience” (Loperena 2015, 191).

Brazil and Colombia and concludes that they moved forward in two waves. One of them came in the 1980s in response to a neo-liberal climate focused mostly on multiculturalism, and the later round came after a 2001 conference in Durban, South Africa, with an emphasis on discrimination and inequality.¹⁴ She also argues the reforms operated in two “fields,” the local and the global, and that success often came when there were “profound changes in the domestic political fields” (Paschel 2016, 3). In Mexico, I argue this condition of political transition could lead to progress for Blacks in the next few years not only because 2015-2024 is the Decade for People of African Descent¹⁵ but also now a new president has been elected who is unaligned with the traditional ruling parties. In addition, Black rights in Mexico could benefit from the conditions Paschel identifies in relation to grassroots social movement, which exist in the Costa Chica, combined with global influence and pressure in a moment when social inequality is being recognized and human rights are being won for people of color throughout Latin America.

The politics of group difference is the focus of Iris Marion Young in her book *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, in which she argues that minority groups need to embrace difference as a path toward social justice. She writes, “Where social group differences exist and some groups are privileged, while others are oppressed, social justice requires explicitly acknowledging and attending to those group differences in

¹⁴ Adopted by consensus at the 2001 World Conference against Racism (WCAR) in Durban, South Africa, the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (DDPA) is a “comprehensive, action-oriented document that proposes concrete measures to combat racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance” (UN.org).

¹⁵ The UN General Assembly proclaimed 2015-2024 as the International Decade for People of Africa Descent (Resolution 68/237), citing the need “to strengthen national, regional and international cooperation in relation to the full enjoyment of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights by people of Africa descent, and their full and equal participation in all aspects of society” (UN.org).

order to undermine oppression” (Young 1990, 3). Young argues that minority groups need to take their cultural differences and use them to gain rights instead of letting the dominant culture use difference to oppress or control minorities. “In general, then, a relational understanding of group difference rejects exclusion. Difference no longer implies that groups lie outside one another” (Young 1990, 171). Young seems to agree with Hooker that cultural difference can drive social movement when groups assert “the positive difference of their experience, culture and social perspective” (172) to advocate for the rights they deserve.

Another important aspect of social movements is the formation of broad alliances in gaining collective rights. Michael Hanchard argues that Afro-descendants are not isolated in their struggles but “have often utilized a combination of domestic and international institutions to redress situations of inequality...” (Hanchard 1999, 248). Hanchard also writes that struggles for the rights of African and...

African-descended peoples...is not territorially demarcated but based on the shared belief in the commonalities of Western oppression experienced by African and African-derived people... [using] political and cultural networks across national-state boundaries (248).

A similar situation is identified in the case of the Zapatista uprising in Mexico in 1994. In this case, according to José Muñoz, international financial and human rights interests combined to pressure the Mexican government to end the rebellion. As Muñoz points out,

Understanding the question how the Zapatista movement developed requires the consideration of the constellation of allies and adversaries within the international sphere...International economic and human rights transformation in Mexico created political opportunities for movements, such as the EZLN, to have a meaningful impact on prospects for domestic political change in Mexico (Muñoz 2006, 251-252).

The transnational nature, not only of social movements, but of identity formation is addressed by several authors, including Clarke and Thomas, who argue that globalization is changing the process of Black racial formation. Their work "...details the various ways that people traditionally classified as 'Black' or of 'African descent' are actively transforming racial meanings..." (Clarke and Thomas 2004, ix). They examine "locality alongside globality" as well as "...the relationships between older imperial relationships and current configurations of power..." (xxix). This legacy of "older" relationships is important. The effects on minorities from globalization are nothing new in Latin America, if the conquest is seen as an early form of globalization. Eduardo Galeano, in *Open Veins of Latin America*, writes about the ways global domination has historically "plundered" Latin America, stating "development develops inequality" (Galeano 1973, 3). Usually those who benefit from economic development are those who are wealthy enough to make financial investments in the first place, while most people lack the resources and representation to fight for their own best interests.

Tiffany Joseph, in her book *Race On The Move: Brazilian Migrants and the Global Reconstruction of Race* (Joseph 2015), also explores the transnational transformation of race, arguing that transnational migration reshapes Brazilians' concepts of race. She follows the transformation of racial ideas from Brazil, to the U.S. and then back again, and observes what happens on each step along the way.

Migration, and return migration in particular, also allows individuals to keep a racial foot in their host and home societies, providing a useful perspective for understanding how race in various countries is transformed via migrants on the move. Through their movement across national borders, migrants come to view and interpret race differently, in turn reconstructing and giving new meaning to race (Joseph 2015, 2).

This transnational process of shifting awareness about race, influenced by time, place, politics and social setting is at the center of this research project.

This last point relating to transnational migration and racial formation leads to another author, Jennifer A. Jones, who studied relations between immigrants from the Costa Chica and the African-American community in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Rather than developing a closeness with whites who could help their upward mobility, she argues “...Mexicans express a sense of closeness with Blacks, increasingly viewing themselves as minorities and as similar to Blacks.” She documented a feeling of “solidarity and a sense of shared discrimination; and an emerging sense of linked fate” (Jones 2011,1).

The shifting alliances noted by Jones could be seen as part of the realignment of racial boundaries resulting from globalization. Aiwā Ong focuses on these kinds of changes and points out that what is missing from writings on post-modernity is “...human agency and its production and negotiation of cultural meanings...” (Ong 1999, 3). Ong writes about the changing forms of citizenship and sovereignty in the globalized world, although her focus is on Asia. She argues that certain classes of citizens, especially certain unskilled minority workers, are being displaced by globalization. This is true in the case of Mexico, since the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA)—an instrument of globalization—has forced small farmers like the Afro-Mexicans in the Costa Chica to migrate because their farms are no longer competitive; they either go to Mexico City or the U.S. in order to help feed their families. Internal migration also takes place when those people who are driven off their farms have to move to Northern Mexico to work in factories there. The movement by Afro-Mexicans to gain an advantage in this

difficult climate represents agency that corresponds to a basic shift Ong explains this way: “Neo-liberalism...is reconfiguring relationships between governing and the governed, power and knowledge, and sovereignty and territoriality” (Ong 2006, 3). Clarke and Thomas describe Ong as being one of the authors “who have parsed how the mobility of some has been contingent upon the immobility or homelessness of others” (Clarke and Thomas 2004, v). Clearly, globalization does not benefit everyone, but it leads to a process of racial formation, often influenced by transnational migration. This racial formation is a process-taking place under changing circumstances which can create new alliances as well as opportunities for agency by individuals encountering shifting racial and political spaces.

Chapter Three: Afro-Mexicans in Pasadena, California: Portrait of a Costa Chica Community Transplanted to the U.S.

Pasadena, California is located just north of Los Angeles near the foot of the San Gabriel Mountains. Like many parts of Southern California, it has been a destination for Mexican migrants. However, I will focus on one group of Blacks from Mexico (Afro-Mexicans) who arrived in Pasadena, and nearby Altadena, beginning in the mid-1980s. Most of these Black immigrants come from two neighboring towns on the Pacific coast of Oaxaca, Mexico—José María Morelos (commonly called Morelos), named after a hero of the Mexican Independence who was part Black himself; and Cerro Blanco, a much smaller town about 5 miles from Morelos. According to the interviews, these towns are mostly Black, especially Morelos. They are among an estimated 29 Black villages in the Costa Chica (Vaughn 2008). By all accounts, Berta was the first immigrant to come from Morelos to Pasadena. Friends and family began to follow Berta

here and now the community estimates there are at least 400, and possibly 700 people in Pasadena who came from the Morelos area. When I visited with Berta, she told me she is not surprised that so many people followed, because that was her intention. But she was surprised at the large numbers of people who came and how quickly the community expanded.¹⁶ The Black Oaxacan community is centered along a dozen or more pleasant, tree-lined streets, in a residential area less than a mile north of thriving downtown Pasadena. The streets—like Marengo, North Summit and Raymond Avenues—have a mixture of apartment buildings that are clearly neglected by the landlords; humble middle-class cottages from the 1920s; and a few larger, more established homes that are clearly more upscale. The economic disparity that is evident in the housing, is softened by the tall green trees that overhang the streets, and the well-kept gardens throughout the neighborhood. Even areas that are not landscaped are still lush with foliage that seems to thrive in the area and helps to create a peaceful environment. There are pockets of commercial activity closer to downtown, but the area where these Black Mexicans live has only residential housing, except for one little corner store, “La Bodeguita,” which is the local convenience food store.

The *Costeños* in Pasadena work long hours in physically demanding jobs, but they also have a close-knit community and get together for parties and celebrations on a regular basis. The women mostly work cleaning houses and the men almost all say they work in construction jobs. Some of the men say they drive more than two hours each way on a workday to reach their job sites. One man had driven from Pasadena to Indio for a period of several months to work on a construction job—that is 127 miles each way,

¹⁶ Berta says the influx has now slowed considerably because of the more recent difficulty of crossing the border without documentation.

or 2 hours and 35 minutes each way if there is no heavy traffic. These people do not have jobs where the employer pays for their temporary housing and they cannot afford motels closer to their jobs. Another man was currently driving each day from his home in Pasadena to San Clemente, CA—a one hour and 46 minute drive each way in good traffic, a distance of 76 miles. For each, their drive to and from work occupied 4 to 5 hours of their day. They clearly feel the long commute is worth the benefit of maintaining close ties to their community of Afro-Mexicans.

When the work is done there is plenty of opportunity to socialize, relax and celebrate. The community looks forward to gatherings where they share stories of their accomplishments and difficulties and their future plans. The residents say there are three or four parties each weekend with many of the same people attending the various events. I was invited to two of those parties, one on Saturday and other one on Sunday night, both birthday celebrations for children. I also learned that on Sunday there was also a Black *quinceañera* celebration in the area, which I did not attend. The Saturday party I attended was a very informal, intimate gathering in the side yard and driveway of one of the resident's apartments. Tables were set up in a narrow space between a garage and the side of someone's apartment. It was made festive by balloons tied to the tables and the sides of the buildings. *Cumbia* music¹⁷ blared from the speakers of a tiny “*grabadora*,” a personal music player. We ate tacos served from a borrowed or rented cart, but which was cooked by the women inside one of the houses. A table was full of salads, chips and *salsas*. A *tres leches pastel* (cake) was served after the meal. I chatted with some of the people, and told them I am from the Costa Chica myself. This seemed

¹⁷ Cumbia, which is said to have some African rhythm, is a popular type of music throughout Latin America.

to amaze them, partly because I was doing a different type of work—graduate work—instead of physical work like them, but came from the same region with a similar background. One of the women was interested in my work and asked me to expand on the history of Blacks in Mexico, which I did. Like many of my interlocutors, she was not aware of any details of the African diaspora. As noted elsewhere in this study, residents of the Costa Chica have little understanding of their history and in no way consider themselves African. They are Black Mexicans. However, they are learning more about their origins and this learning process was visible at this party. As I was questioned by this young woman, I got a first-hand view of the process of transnational racial formation. With the new information she would acquire, this woman can reflect on her ethnic past, navigate her present boundaries of culture and race, and create her own racial future.

One of the men told me about the goal many of the Costa Chicanos have to save money to build a house in Mexico, even though those houses often remain empty. They are unoccupied until their owners living the U.S. decide to go back home or are pushed to return because of immigration problems. These empty houses, according to Laura Lewis, who observed this phenomenon (during her field work in San Nicolas, Guerrero) of Afro-Mexicans in the U.S. building houses in Mexico little by little over time, says the houses seem to represent a sense of belonging to place as well as upward mobility for these marginalized communities in Mexico. Lewis says, “They are both economic and cultural motivators. They are also a potent symbol of home place” (Lewis 2013, 11). The man I talked with at the party said he could build one of these cinder block (Lewis 2013) houses for about 40 thousand U.S. dollars. This obviously will take several years because the *Costeños* in Pasadena do not earn big salaries and their expenses are fairly high. They

say rents are high because there is no rent control in Pasadena. They pay as much as \$1800 per month for a two bedroom apartment which is not particularly well maintained by the landlords, judging by the homes I visited to conduct interviews. Because of the economic pressure, more than one family often occupies these apartments and the rent can be shared by a few residents with jobs who can put their funds together.

The next day—on Sunday—there was another, much larger, birthday party at the house of one of my participants; this time the place was packed with Afro-Mexicans from the Costa Chica as the host told me it would be. I estimated 200 people came and went during the duration of the party. There were tables decorated with elaborate embroidery tablecloths, balloons, *piñatas* and an inflatable playroom where the kids were bouncing and screaming. A table with *mole*, *barbacoa*, rice, tortillas and salad was at the center of the congregation. Like a saint in a church, centrally located was the three-tier cake on another long table, and it was a focal point for taking pictures. People were eating and drinking beer “just like we do back home,” one guest told me. The music was blasting from speakers larger than the night before. Being there I noticed that even though people are from the same area, they look very different from each other. Some of them have darker skin and a more Black phenotype; others have lighter skin and some also have white skin, so the rainbow of colors is from Black to lighter and from kinky to straight hair. I talked to a man whom I will consider white but who has kinky hair and who pointed out his uncle who was Black. I informally asked another guest at this party how he described himself and he jokingly said, “I am Indian from India.” Here the history of racial mixture in Mexico is on display and the fact that race is not color was also clear. This community, transplanted from their isolated villages in Mexico, to a community of

people who keep to themselves here in the U.S. could indicate an old habit or preference for being close-knit, self-reliant and staying inside their comfort zone. But, judging mostly from responses in the interviews, it is also a picture of a community in the process of constructing race “around local knowledge, history and politics” (Lewis 2012, 7) both here and in Mexico.

Education is a key to this new awareness of race. Many of the families came to Pasadena for better educational opportunities for themselves and their children and a lot of the young people are attending Pasadena Community College or a four-year college. The knowledge and critical thinking learned in higher education is shared with their families, creating a new discourse about race, giving them more ability to renegotiate their identities.

Many of the people I interviewed, and who I talked with at the birthday parties, mentioned that the community comes together to help each other when they are having financial or health troubles. For example, if someone dies in their village in Mexico, three people are assigned to go door-to-door collecting money to send back home. The same thing happens when there is a natural disaster in Mexico, like an earthquake or flooding. The Pasadena community rallies together to raise money to help rebuild their towns back in Mexico. For a while there was an official organization to do this, but apparently now it is more personal and informal. Also, many of the people who I interviewed were also at the two parties I attended, and said the group stays together and sees each other often for a variety of social events. In this way, the Costa Chicanos maintain the community identity and closeness they brought with them from Mexico

while at the same time sharing their new knowledge with others, a process of social formation through communication and celebration.

Azúcar Mi Negro: Race in the Lives of the Pasadena Costeños

The Afro-Mexicans of Pasadena created a “little Costa Chica,” a kind of cultural, social and racial island in the middle of the Southern California megalopolis. Here, they are in the process of racial formation shaped by their traditional beliefs, brought with them from Mexico; by their new surroundings, in a racial environment different from their home towns; and by the social movement in Mexico fighting for their rights and recognition. I talked to the community members to paint a picture of this racial formation in a transnational setting. I wanted to learn about their experiences of racism and discrimination both in Mexico and the U.S., their changing ideas of racial self-identification, and their thoughts on the social movement for Afro-Mexican recognition. I recorded oral histories that give context to the racial formation-taking place in Pasadena today. The transformation of these Afro-Mexicans from being the subjects, or the victims, of *mestizaje* to a new racial awareness—making their own identity in a transnational setting—is seen through the difficult lives they have lived, the stories they tell and the concerns they share. All of the people interviewed were asked a wide variety of questions and all their responses were interesting; so, many different kinds of answers will be included. However, the interviews will be presented in three groups that broadly correspond to the main themes of this study: Race as a social construct; the whitening discourse of *mestizaje* (and the discrimination that it brings); and, social movements and transnational migration.

For reasons of privacy, I will use pseudonyms when referring to the Afro-Mexicans from the Costa Chica who have immigrated to Pasadena. However, I will use the real names of public figures who appear in this research—Sergio Peñaloza Pérez, Dr. Peña Martínez, Jorge Pérez Solano, and educator Daniel Cendejáz-Méndez, who has already appeared in a documentary film under his own name and agreed that his name can be used in this project.

Race as a Social Construct

Alberto is a dark skinned Black man in his late twenties, who is very personable and forthcoming in describing issues relating to race. He is the first person I met when I located the gathering of Afro-Mexicans in the courtyard of the Sacred Heart church. Alberto's colorful references to racial perceptions and racial discrimination illustrate the ways in which race is constructed in a transnational community of Blacks from Mexico, now living in Southern California. And, his references to the use of language, music and popular culture illustrate the unique cultural identity of this community.

Alberto expressed pride in being Black: "I do not deny my color...I always say I am Black." Growing up he had to work as a child and made some money to help his parents, but did not feel different from the rest of the people in the town of José María Morelos. "We are 90% Black people in town," he says. He attended elementary school and when he was 13 years old he was sent to Acapulco to finish high school. At a young age as a Black student from a remote area, he had to deal with new rules and had to learn how to navigate spaces that were foreign to him. He points out, "When you go outside of your town [Morelos] is when you see the different treatment people give you...when I

went to Acapulco people would make fun of me.” In school he was bullied because of his dark skin—“*azul yo diría*, blue I would say, even purple,” making a joking reference to how he sees his Blackness. This points to the wide difference of skin pigmentation and African facial features even in his own family; he mentions his brothers have much lighter skin. In Acapulco, Afro-Mexicans also stand out not only for their color but also for speech patterns. Alberto explains, “We are identified by the way we speak and because of certain phrases we have in the Costa that are unknown to other people in Mexico.” According to him this is “*Costeño style*,” Alberto says, “We used words like hey, *¿A dónde vas? ¿Quieres ceviche, jaiba brava? Hey te muevo la pancita! Dame cinco pesos! Vamonos al rio! Vamos a la playa!*” These are markers of the way *Costeños* have constructed race, which made Alberto an outsider in Acapulco. He also observes that, when speaking, most Blacks drop their last consonant, another point of difference that would bring discrimination. “I used to say these words,” he recalls, “but people would laugh and make fun of me by calling me names—*oye chico, mi negro, mi negrito, mi costeñito, cubanito*—or (“*azúcar mi negro*”)¹⁸ and “Johnny Laboriel.”¹⁹ He said, “you feel awkward when people pick on you and that made me angry...Before moving to Pasadena the word *cubano* was offensive for me. Why would someone call me that? I am Mexican not Cuban.” Another interlocutor, Alma, also experienced this, saying “[When I was in school in Mexico City] they would always call me things like ‘Cuban girl,’ ‘African girl,’ things like that.” This reflects the perception of Cuba as a Black nation, which is recognized by authors including Alejandro de la Fuente who writes about the “centrality of race in the construction and representation of the Cuban nation...” (de la

¹⁸ This is in reference to Celia Cruz, a well-known Black salsa singer from Cuba.

¹⁹ A Mexican rock and roll star, whose roots are from Garifuna Black communities in Honduras.

Fuente 2001, 1). Black history in Cuba originated with slavery as it did for all of Latin America, but in Cuba became for central to the national identity, since equality was the official position of the government since Independence—although in fact racism never disappeared. More recently, as Perry notes, with “...Cuba’s new monetized economy, the tourism industry has enabled a commodification and vending of Afro-Cuban cultural forms for consumption by foreign tourists and the Cuban state alike” (Perry 2016, 13). As a result, according to Roland, “...Racial stereotypes and prejudices are being magnified in today’s era of revived international tourism” (Roland 2011, 30).

Alberto’s first year of school was difficult. However, he caught the attention of the principal who would “...talk to me and give moral support and she was there for me at all times.” The words of his principal that Alberto remembers to this day are, “*No te avergüences de tu color, mi esposo es tan negro como tu.*” The fact that the principal’s husband was Black helped Alberto understand he was not alone in having to navigate different racial boundaries in his new location.

In Alberto’s experience, dealing with his bullying and discrimination as a teenager in Mexico in a way prepared him for his future path. His awareness of his Blackness and its consequences were a racial formation Alberto would bring to the U.S., where he would discover a different racial climate. Alberto explains that race is an important factor in Mexico in gaining access to services, jobs, health care and education. The white superiority and entitlement he saw growing up is still alive everywhere, he says, “They [whites/*mestizos*] think that everything belongs to them, and are the only people with the rights to have an opinion. And they are so close-minded that sometimes they get lost in their own world without seeing other different people around them.” His

comment goes to the heart of the exclusionary mentality many people maintain around race, and their view of “the other” as being less trustworthy or valuable—or even as being “backward” (Paschel 2016; Mora 2017).

Alberto says that he could not continue with his education in Mexico so he had to travel to the US. for economic reasons and during that trip he was almost deported from his own country because he is Black. He says he was stopped at a checkpoint in Northern Mexico and remembers “...police or migration officers would harass you because you look different. They did not believe I was Mexican but Honduran even though I had my Mexican I.D.” Either government officials are totally ignorant of the fact there are Blacks in Mexico or they were trying to get a bribe, according to Alberto. “They threatened to deport me, but luckily there were more Black people from my town on the bus and they did not let the officer drag me off the bus. Later on another official came onto the bus who ordered to the police to let me go.” This kind of discrimination by police, targeting Black Mexicans and accusing them of being from another country, is repeated by other interlocutors and is also a scene in the movie *La Negra*, which will be analyzed later in this study.

Alberto is like many of the Pasadena Costa Chicans who have been devalued and mistreated in Mexico because of their color—victims of the whitening discourse of *mestizaje*. And, his new pride about being Black shows a racial transformation that has taken place in a transnational setting. Alberto also points to unique cultural traits of the Costa Chica Blacks which could help identify them as a distinct cultural group deserving of collective rights (Hooker 2014).

Alma is a 48 years old single mother of four children—all college students. She talks candidly about how race is constructed socially depending on circumstances and location. She is very involved in the church and was the second Black person I spoke with at their gathering after mass at the Sacred Heart church. Her intellect, grace and contagious enthusiasm made her very popular not only with her own people but also with people from the African-American community in her church. In fact, she says she is often mistaken for an African-American. In terms constructing race here in the U.S., Alma says, “It is something really complicated. Especially here!” [pointing down]. “When you are filling out an application, you see a whole bunch of races but none of them are mine. So I always have to put ‘other.’ Without a doubt, I come from a Black race. I identify as a person of color.” Alma has a very light skin color and could pass as a *mestizo* woman in Mexico, if not for her kinky hair. Alma says, “I was born in José María Morelos but moved to Mexico City when I was 12 years old.” She continues, “I finished high school and studied general nursing. I think my reasons for coming [to the US.] are not very different from most people: looking for a better life for my family, for my children. For more opportunities. For better education.” She also did not realize she was different from the rest of society in Mexico. The discovery of her ethnic background came when she moved to the megalopolis. She adds,

When I was in Mexico City is when I became aware of my Black heritage because [in my province where I grew up] all I saw was that we were the same color and I did not see differences in color. In the city, they [classmates and people in my neighborhood] treated me differently. I did not understand. In Mexico City people give everyone a lot of nicknames and they tell you things and one of the things they would say to me is, ‘hey, *negrita*, are you made of a patent leather? Do you grease yourself up?’ Things like that...Or ‘smile so that we can see you.’

Like other Afro-Mexicans I interviewed, Alma says that there is very little racial difference in the Costa Chica, but that when *Costeños* leave the “comfort zone” of their home villages they notice discrimination.

Alma argues that she did not understand why people would call her names “because there are much darker people, [than me] but they have straight hair or they are taller, so maybe because of my curly hair, my [skin] color you get closer to Black features...” When talking about how she sees discrimination in Mexico she points out that

...It is something that causes me a lot of discomfort, especially now that I am closely affiliated with the church, and I know that we are all children of God and that for him there are no differences. But I am not afraid to say that back there, in my Black village, we are very racists, and we draw a lot of distinctions, and we discriminate... most of us are Black but we do not hesitate to say things like, ‘you look like an indian,’ because back there the workers are the indigenous people... And something that makes me really mad is when people refer to others as either “the indians” or “the people who reason.” What is that? People who reason? As if the others were irrational animals or something like that.

This attitude of Blacks toward indigenous to differentiate their identities is what Vinson reports happened in the New World to control indians. “...White Spaniards felt entitled to extract the best of the New World had to offer,” Vinson writes. “To perpetuate this status, they designated as *gente de razón*, literally ‘people of reason’ uniquely capable of making rational decisions” (Vinson 2018, 2). This is political racism which shaped the racial formation of the time and still lingers in the consciousness of Mexicans, especially in their relations with the indigenous.

Alma felt this discrimination first hand toward indigenous people because her father was a landowner and had an agricultural business. When lunchtime arrived, workers were not allowed to sit and eat at the same table with the boss, so Alma was obliged to take the food outside the house for them to eat. She remembers the interaction

with her father: “I would say to him, ‘why do they not just sit here [at the kitchen table]? And he would say, ‘they are indians. Just take them their plate over there. That would make me so mad.”

Alma goes on to explain that:

Maybe we believe that discrimination only exists between one country and another, but in a village, as small as mine you see it! Within the same group [of Black people] they will be like, ‘you’re Black, I am *morena*, I am *apillonada*.’ It’s as though the darker you are the less you are worth.”

Here Alma highlights the long tradition in the European world of devaluing darker skinned people, especially those who have been conquered or colonized. The Spanish did this with their *casta* system of prioritizing minorities in New Spain (Vinson 2018). It is a belief institutionalized later in *mestizaje*, in which a whitening of Mexico in general was preferable to any individual darker skinned group (Vasconcelos 1925).

Living in Mexico City, Alma says she did not suffer discrimination as much as other Blacks around her. Looking back, she reflects:

I maybe could have experienced serious discrimination and I know people, who did even without having features that mark them as different, but we know how corruption works in Mexico and because the father of my children was in politics and we had somewhat higher social standing that influenced things. He always went with me everywhere, [social services] and he did not hesitate to show his badge, so doors opened everywhere we went. I think that [if I had not been married to him] I would have had a harder time.

This preference Alma experienced is the hierarchy of class versus caste, in which those with status are given the priority over someone who is considered to be in a lower position. At the same time, those in the lower position are often given this lower status because of their skin color, so discrimination based on caste and class are closely tied together.

Amanda is a petite woman in her late fifties with a sweet, yet strong personality. She is the sister of Berta, who is accepted as being the founder of the Pasadena Afro-Mexican community. Her story of determination in the face of many major changes in her life illustrates the role of personal agency in racial formation as she travels across national boundaries and across the U.S.

Amanda identifies as Afro-Mexican, using the current language of the movement. In José María Morelos, her native town, she did not feel different in terms of race and skin color. “We are all Blacks there,” she said, now in a softened voice, as if trying to recover the innocence of those days. She explains how her childhood changed suddenly when her family moved to Mexico City when she was 10 years old. She portrays herself as a country Black girl in a big city full of a rainbow of people but no one that resembles her.” Her expression is one of disbelief.

“In my town were mostly Blacks so nobody reminded me I was different. However, in Mexico City we were something else: the Blacks. We felt the aggression in school and in the streets and we were called *los negros*. In the street we lived we felt it everyday. In Mexico city, I think there is more racism toward us, the *negros*, not only because we had a different skin color and appearance, but also because we are from Oaxaca state.”

In Mexico there is this sense that Southern states are heavily indigenous populations--so the widespread belief is those peoples are backwards or *indios*. Here Amanda’s experiences double racism because she is Black but also can also be disparaged because of her region of origin. She continues:

People in our neighborhood would not talk to my family because of our skin color but also I think it was because when we arrived in Mexico City we did not have any utensils for the kitchen, stove, television, we had only two beds where we all slept together. We were poor! There in the street we played with other kids and if something went wrong, we would always fight (laughs). We always defended ourselves. If they would give me one, I would give it back! We always defended ourselves! Or at least I always did, I never stayed quiet! I always spoke up! I

never allowed myself to be insulted among us kids. I always felt I was stronger than them.”

As one would expect of a charismatic, charming and good natured individual, soon Amanda would step up in her neighbors’ expectations and be accepted like any other kid. By breaking this barrier Amanda realized that she had agency when she said, “I always felt I was stronger than them” [referring to the kids in her street]. Probably her determination to advance was just as important as strength, and both qualities give her agency to transform a situation that is undesirable and to engage in racial formation that gives her a better understanding of her potential. Meantime, that strong will and experience defending herself gave Amanda the ability to navigate spaces in life. “I was very outgoing and eventually people started to like that... Even the people who had made fun of my appearance, eventually would invite me to their parties, even if my family would not be invited,” she says this with an easy laugh. Amanda only finished junior high school, but even with her limited education later on worked as a police officer in Mexico City.

But there were more big changes to come when Amanda joined the transnational migration to the U.S.

Later I married my husband and had one son; my husband had family in New York City and so in 1987 we decided to uproot once more for that city. I worked in the garment industry there and started sewing. I had three more kids, but I got tired of the weather and being without my family, so finally we moved to Pasadena where the rest of my family was already settled. In the meantime I learned some English, and I took classes to get my GED diploma. In Pasadena I opened a dress shop and made-to-order clothes for any occasion but especially *quinceañeras* dresses. Now I am an independent Herbalife distributor, and I am happy with it.

The agency Amanda demonstrates through her life shows how she constructed race through her own necessity and challenges. When asked if she thinks there is

discrimination because of color in race in Mexico she responded, “Yes, there is a lot of discrimination, especially in Mexico City but if you have strong personality and willpower you can weather it.”

Amanda as well as other people in the community thinks that the change for equality is, finally arriving in Mexico and she adds,

Social movements are positive because *negros* are being highlighted, and the country is accepting that in Mexico there are *negros* as well not only white or indigenous. I do not think there are [Black] people who would feel ashamed. I think people would be recognized and there is going to be more benefit for us. I think that this new government [of President Andrés Manuel López Obrador, or AMLO] is going to open doors for us. When campaigning for the presidency in Mexico, AMLO visited the Black region. He was in my town, so he knows we exist. I think he is going to help us as an ethnic group a lot.²⁰

Amanda’s optimism is supported by Paschel’s observation that social movements in Colombia and Brazil were able during a short period of time to go from being in the margins of society to being recognized in their constitutions (Paschel 2016). Amanda and others interviewed for this study are hopeful this will soon happen in Mexico.

The Whitening Discourse of *Mestizaje* and the Discrimination That Results

Ana is a 30 year old mother of three from Cerro Blanco, Oaxaca, who has been in this country for 25 years, took some college classes, and who works as a real estate property manager. She identifies as Afro-Mexicana. Easy-going and helpful, she was eager to talk about race, both here and in Mexico.

One story relates to the discrimination faced by *Costeños* when they leave their villages.

I didn’t hear my Mom tell the story, but I heard some other lady say that she was on the bus one time, and she was really dark, she came from Oaxaca, and she

²⁰ This optimism was also expressed by other Afro-Mexicans in Pasadena during interviews and other informal conversations.

went to Mexico City and people kept looking at her and she was really pretty, she had a pretty nice body, and this man was staring at her and she tells him ‘What are you looking, did you lose someone like me?’ She said and the guy goes, “Yeah, but lighter and Mexican.” And she goes “What does that mean?” What do you mean ‘lighter and Mexican, I’m Mexican.’ So it was like you’re still in Mexico, but you go outside of your comfort zone, that’s when you start hearing the racial comments because you’re not a lighter version of the Mexican.

Also in terms of color, Ana feels was misunderstood when she was a young student arriving in the U.S. She was assigned an English-only class because the teachers noticed her color and assumed she was African-American. “I remember sitting in the class crying all day because I didn’t understand anything the teacher was saying,” says Ana, who apparently was too shy to speak up at first, but was eventually moved to the proper class.

Friendly relations with African-Americans in the U.S. is one factor that appears to have opened the eyes of the Afro-Mexicans in Pasadena to a different transnational understanding of race and a greater acceptance of Blackness. In one exchange, Ana highlights relations between the *Costeños* and African-Americans in the U.S., and the discrimination because of skin color that the Afro-Mexicans face here in the U.S.

AR: How is the relationship between Afro-Mexicans here in Pasadena and the African-American community? Do you have friends who are African-American?

ANA: Yes. In high school, my best friend was African-American. We’re still in touch, although not as much because we both got married, had our kids, but we stay in touch.

AR: What about other members of the community?

ANA: Yes. For example, I know you met María. Did you meet her older son Yandel?

AR: No.

ANA: He’s of a very dark complexion. So, she used to mention to me that he went to school with African-Americans. She says, “I think he only hangs out with Black people.” I asked why and she said, “Because he says they’re the only people who want to play with him.” So even now you still see it, even though there are more of us, or the history of Afro-Mexicans is better known, but even the kids now are still seeing that isolation because of complexion, like Yandel, he hangs out with the African-Americans, because those are the kids who will accept him.

In terms of relations between African-Americans and Afro-Mexicans, Ana story corresponds with the findings of Jones, that the immigrant community in Winston-Salem, North Carolina developed a surprising closeness to the African-American community, more than with the white community (Jones 2011, 1).

María is a 32 year old mother of four who came from Santa María, Cerro Blanco, near Morelos, 16 years ago. She identifies as *negra*. María highlights issues related to the whitening influence of *mestizaje*, as well as the distancing from Blackness and the discrimination against people of color that result from the “ingrained mythos of white supremacy” in Mexico (Vinson 2018, 53).

María says that in Mexico, Black is considered ugly and that people often try to marry someone from outside their town, someone with lighter skin. She says, “Cerro Blanco used to have darker Black people.” This is similar to the temporal distancing researchers have found among people of the Costa Chica, in which locals perceive their towns to be lighter than they used to be, even though it would seem to outside observers to be mostly Black.

María also points to a way in which exposure to modern ideas of Afro-Mexican rights is “deployed” differently in Pasadena than it might be in the other Afro-Mexican *pueblos* of the Costa Chica. It seems that discrimination and police brutality against people of color in the United States are making some members of this community aware of the delicate situation they can encounter in Pasadena. As María explains, “I see the news with all the police brutality against Blacks here in the United States, and I think this could happen to me or someone from my *pueblo*.” I later learned through María neighbor’s that one of her son's is rejected and being bullied at school by his *latino*

classmates due to his Black skin color and phenotype, so the boy has befriended African-American classmates who accept him for being Black. These types of environments, where people are excluded or ostracized, is where race is redefined and reconstructed to fit the need for self-survival, and the survival of family and the community. In this case, the racial formation has been to form an alliance for self protection or natural affinity with another group of African descent—the phenomenon identified by Jones (Jones 2011).

Discrimination based on skin color and phenotype is illustrated by **Daniel**, the teacher who I interviewed in Pasadena one day before I visited Sacred Heart Church and made contact with the Afro-Mexicans from the Costa Chica. He had appeared in a documentary about Afro-Mexicans in the U.S. and I found his contact information online. He promised to put me in touch with another teacher he knows, who interacts with families in the Pasadena *Costeño* community. Daniel is of Afro-Mexican descent, but his family is from Michoacán, rather than Oaxaca or Guerrero, and he was born in the U.S. He told a story that sheds light on the invisibility of Afro-Mexicans and the discrimination against people with darker skin, in this case here in the U.S.

When my girlfriend had her baby shower, right, you know her family came over and whatever. And I guess one of her Mom's friends, she just kept looking at me like, you know, I guess he's really dark, you know, she didn't say it to me, but so she ended up telling her, "Hey, like, did your daughter marry a Black guy?" And then her Mom was like, no, he's not Black, he's Mexican. And, I was like, well technically, she's not wrong, I'm part Black. And I was talking about it with them at dinner, telling them that my great grandmother was Afro-descendant. So, she's not lying, but I'm like, why she would be shocked, I mean, I don't get that.

This exchange illustrates the complexity of race in Mexico and the U.S. In Daniel's story, we see again that darker skin is often not valued as much as whiter skin.

You even see it in families. They would call each other names just because they are darker or lighter depending on the case. If you have darker skin, they would call you *indio* or *negro*. If you have lighter skin, "*guerito*." It is better if you have lighter skinned children. Sometimes people are encouraged to marry a lighter person to better the race. This has been happening for centuries—historically.

Daniel's story about his mother-in-law's friend also shows that little is known about Afro-Mexicans in either in the U.S. or Mexico, and Daniel says he struggles to educate people about his racial identity and the existence of Black Mexicans. As a teacher, he tries to introduce the children to ideas about race whenever he has the chance.

...Whenever people ask me "What are you?", because I'm always asked that, "What are you?" People ask me whether I'm Filipino, or if in this case I'm black...I work with students [and] it was interesting because we were talking about that and they asked me the same thing, and for me it was another perfect opportunity to talk about it. They'd say, "What are you?" and I'd say "I'm Mexican," OK, culturally I'm Mexican. But I asked them, "Are you asking me what I am ethnically?" They said yes. And I said, "Well, I'm European, native and African." And they were like "What?" They couldn't believe it...

Daniel, as a student of Mexican history and a teacher,²¹ is in a unique position to help wipe out the ignorance and stereotypes that surround Blackness and the invisibility of Afro-Mexicans, and he says he takes every opportunity he can to engage people in conversations about race, furthering the racial formation taking place among Afro-Mexicans.

Social Movements and Transnational Migration

Andrés is 64 years old, dark skinned man who is a former mayor of his town, José María Morelos, and is well respected in the Pasadena Afro-Mexican community. Because of his experience in politics, he is in a good position to talk about

²¹ Daniel Cendejaz is Instructional Coordinator at A Place Called Home, a protective learning center founded in the aftermath of the Los Angeles riots in 1992 to provide a safe sanctuary for children affected by gang violence in South Central Los Angeles.

the difficulties Afro-Mexicans face in the Costa Chica and the need for a social movement to gain Afro-Mexican rights and recognition. He also seemed to truly enjoy our conversation and to appreciate the opportunity to share his experience and his views. Many people told me I should talk with Andrés. He is a Black farmer with only a third year primary education; however, his comfortable, expressive and eloquent conversation makes him seem like someone with a college degree.

Andrés is proud to be Black and took part in some of the meetings in his home village promoting the social movement for Black recognition. He worked alongside Father Glynn and another organizer, Israel Reyes Larrea, and said the goal was to “...Let the government see we are here. We exist here and we contribute to the government, to the country. We need to be valued and recognized. We live here!” When asked whether there is still racism in Mexico, Andrés seems to echo Fanon in the way he acknowledges the “fact of Blackness’ and talks about racism as a mental condition.

White people and the ruling class in Mexico believe themselves to be superior. Basically for them, we are inferior. They are mentally damaged in that way...I believe throughout the world people of color are valued less. The problem with these people is mental. Because men aren’t measured by their color, they are measured by their potential in the world. By their potential for development, education, all aspects of life. In Mexico we see racism. People of color [in my town] are always mocked.

Andrés talks very intensely about the lack of educational opportunities for his people in Mexico. He emphasizes how sad, hurt and disappointed he was to drop out school at a young age to work in the fields with his grandfather who raised him.

I wanted to have an education, but unfortunately in those times—I was born in 1954—in those times our parents and grandparents did not have the economic resources or the foresight to recognize how beneficial it would be for their children to receive an education. My grandfather, may he rest in peace, would say, ‘I am going to teach you how to work because the teachers are all filled up, and I started to cry when he told me that... I was intellectually curious and had the

desire to achieve greater things, but I could not because of that [economic means]...

Many other Afro-Mexicans in the Pasadena community expressed regret that were unable to get a good education when they were younger. Andrés says money was not the only problem. He says Mexico was influenced by political racism.

Back in the day, Porfirio Díaz [former authoritarian president of Mexico for more than 30 years] would tell Mexican parents, ‘your children are meant to work. Teach them to work. That is what they are meant to do.’ What an aberration! We need training. We need to go to school in order to contribute more to the development of the country. I could have been a lawyer! I could have been a journalist! A doctor! But we lacked the tools, which is school-based learning. I could have been someone [in life]! A minister! Why not? God gave me a brain to interpret and to understand what the world is, how the world is supposed to live. That is what I think.

Andrés is among the few in his U.S. community who told me they have a good knowledge of the diaspora. “I identify myself as an Afro-descendent person because I know a bit of the history and I know my ancestors came from Africa,” Andrés emphatically says. However, he repeats two legends often told in different forms by people in the Costa Chica, which are historically questionable, but offer localized origin stories for his people. One, he says,

... is that Black people from the southern parts of the U.S moved to Mexico due to the hard working conditions. And there is another story that there was a ship coming from Africa to bring slaves to Mexico and it sank on the Costa Chica... and they [the slaves] made their way to land and began to expand along the coast.

This vague and confusing picture of the Afro-Mexican origins on the coast was also mentioned by Linda, who I also interviewed for this project, and is noted by other researchers in the Costa Chica (Lewis 2012, 86; Jerry 2013, 158). Anthony Jerry argues that the ship stories, “...suggest that the current racial project is one that is locating Blackness within the Mexican state, and therefore demanding recognition based on the historic participation within the nation,” rather than diaspora. This, he writes,

“...highlights the sense of autochthony that Blacks in the Costa Chica feel” (Jerry 2013, 159).

Andrés also highlights the cultural artifacts which, according to Hooker, could help Afro-Mexicans win collective rights. For example, the Afro-Mexicans have made their own traditions with “La Danza de los Diablos” which identifies them as a group in La Costa Chica. In this dance, which may or may not have African roots (Lewis 2012, 136; Jerry 2013, 46), the dancers wear large, frightening masks, dance to a heavy drumbeat and crack a whip.

The way we interpret the dance is that there is a man who controlled things...They called him El Pancho. He laid down the law with a lash, with a whip....That was their way of governing the *haciendas*, of controlling workers...That is what it represents. Control, dominion by a dominant overseer...And I believed that the level of subjugation [represented in the dance] happened here...Because if you look at it we are talking about haciendas. And to control people who are from a different culture, there has to be subjugation. So that originates here in Mexico.

Here Andrés sites the dance directly in his home territory where Blacks suffered the oppression of slavery. In this sense, the dance is not diasporic but autochthonous, pointing to a unique cultural trait of the kind Hooker suggested would be necessary for a minority group to win collective rights (Hooker 2005). Andrés’s use of the words “control” and “domination” as themes of the dance also reflects Bonfil’s argument that invading groups seek to affirm superiority and control over the colonized (Bonfil 1996).

Andrés is hopeful about the future, saying that possibly the social movement for Black recognition “is finally going to achieve its goals because of the changes that are emerging in Mexico.” He says past politicians “sacked” the nation like pirates. But now, he says the people need to organize and properly propose the goals of the Costa Chica Blacks, and that the newly elected leftist President Andrés Manuel López Obrador will “constitutionalize our identity.” As Paschel points out in relation to Brazil and Colombia,

political transitions can create a moment of opportunity for dramatic social change (Paschel 2016, 3).

Santos is 59 years old, and has a lighter complexion—he does not look like he is Afro-Mexican. “Here in the U.S. I would describe myself Afro-Mexican and Afro-*Mestizo* in Mexico,” Santos says emphatically. He is an articulate and soft spoken person who was involved in local politics in Mexico during the early 90s as the leader of a communal land (ejidos) authority. He has knowledge of his African roots because he is a member of a National Synarchist Union—a small political party that brought teachers to isolated communities without roads—where people walked around on footpaths—and with no electricity or running water. Thanks to this party, the town was assigned private teachers and that is the way Santos himself was able to attend and finish elementary school. He points out,

I went to a private school that was sent by the National Synarchist Union, and it was in school that we learned about our race, our history, where we came from, why we were there. I was probably fourteen or so when I came to realize that there were Black people and white people. I started learning then ... I thought ‘how is it possible that people could be brought and transported like animals?’ Just like you might say, ‘sell me a bull to work with, sell me a horse,’ that is how the hacienda owners brought us. That is how they brought my ancestors. My grandparents and parents also knew that their ancestors had been brought from Africa. They had awareness. When they learned or how, I do not know, but they did have an understanding that their ancestors had come from Africa [It was part of the oral history].

Santos points out that “In 1994, the National Indigenous Institute of Mexico finally recognized Black people in Mexico as having their own ethnicity. They were not recognized before that [date].” He continues, “At least 95% of the people there, the people I represented, were Black people—Afro-*Mestizo*.”

As many of the interlocutors in this project pointed out, education is key to social advancement and economic well-being and many of them feel deprived of the education they deserved. They feel, as some researchers have pointed out (Telles, et al 2015; Trejo 2016), that education is often denied or more difficult to obtain for people of color in Mexico. Santos acknowledged how lucky he was to have finished elementary school considering the poverty and marginalization he experienced as an orphan child. “I never knew my father,” he said. Seeing his sad and melancholic expression, I was seized with regret for asking about his early family life.

As all of the Afro-Mexicans interviewed for this project, Santos claims that discrimination toward minorities, especially Blacks, is rampant in Mexico. He observed this first hand during the three years he served as municipal authority in José María Morelos. Santos explains, “I was responsible for administering federal resources that come to the village. They [the government] sent economic resources for development of public works. So that is what one administers so that they can build classrooms, schools, clinics, pave roads...” Santos concludes that these federal programs [budgets] do not arrive in full to the communities and that in every bureaucratic transaction the amount of money destined for each community diminishes considerably and this he calls “corruption and discrimination.” He points out,

The municipalities did receive funds, just not that much. And then obviously whatever each community received from those funds was even more limited. That might have resulted from a combination of discrimination and corruption. They go hand-in-hand. They say that in the most marginalized villages people are ignorant about federal policies and thus are given less. This state-level discrimination is experienced by indigenous communities as well.

Since he has experience with political leadership I was curious about Santos's inputs on social movements for constitutional recognition and human rights for Afro-Mexicans.

This was his response:

I believe that [these social movements for equality], when they rise with good intentions, are fine. When they are intended to inform the government and the world that we exist, that African roots are there, and that Mexico also had slavery, not just here in the U.S., and we are here as their descendants. That is the benefit! The counterpart has to do with corruption. There are many leaders of different ethnicities that the government tries to silence and subjugate. [The government would say] I will give you privileges, to you. You will be fine, economically. Just forget about everyone else. Lots of people do it for that reason, to reap a personal benefit. Not everyone. There are natural leaders who do it in good faith to defend the rights of our people, of our race. And even though it hurts, we have to recognize that in Mexico corruption is a daily phenomenon and the government always tries to corrupt. 'Stay quiet, and I will give you this, just calm down'.

The danger of the government corruption in trying to destabilize the social movement by buying or bribing its leaders was a focal point for Santos and is an issue that in different ways can negatively affect the cause. Another interesting point is that many of my interlocutors understand the dynamic and power of social movements. Santos observes that because indigenous people were marginalized, they rose up in arm in the 1994 Chiapas rebellion in Mexico. He believes: "... [from] 1960-2000, indigenous people were more marginalized ...That is why the armed uprising happened in Chiapas...That was the start of greater attention being paid to indigenous communities and not to Afro-Mexicans..." In my conversations with other Afro-Mexicans, the armed conflict in Chiapas was also mentioned and held up as the only way to gain indigenous rights in Mexico, giving some indication there are many ways to make wrongs right.

Hernando is a 51-year-old male, the brother of Berta, who was the first immigrant from Morelos to arrive in Pasadena in the 1980s. He is an American citizen now, the father of three young girls and works in television graphics. When asked how

he identifies in terms of race, he says, “Now, it’s Afro-Mexican. But first and foremost, Mexican. Back in Mexico, I knew my family was Black, ...but I never knew I had African roots...it was not something that was taught in school. As far as most Mexicans are concerned, there are no Black people in Mexico.”

Hernando was part of a local organization of Afro-Mexicans in Pasadena who helped each other and helped others back home. They paid for an ambulance in their hometown of Morelos because there was none. And medical care is lacking. Hernando says, “There’s a clinic, but it’s small. Sometimes, there’s no medicine. And sometimes people from smaller towns come to that clinic, because where they come from, there is even less care.” Hernando also says there’s no help from the government to improve the schools. “There is an elementary school,” he says. “But there is no high school. There is no college. People have to get away from those towns and drive like 8 hours to get to a college.” Hernando says people with dark skin will definitely face discrimination in Mexico, whether indigenous or Black. When asked whether caste or class determines who will face discrimination, Hernando said:

I would start with class in Mexico. It depends on where you grew up. In my town, in Estado de Mexico [after his family moved from the coast], it was class. Like people who live in the nicer parts of town will get all the activities, like little parks, and better schools than the people who are poorer. Thing is you go outside, like Oaxaca, there’s more racism because the parts that are darker, they get less than the parts that are whiter. So, it’s both.

Hernando says the movement for Afro-Mexican rights is a positive thing. It will help bring education and services. Like many in Pasadena, he is aware of the social movement and the need for constitutional recognition and human rights. He met father Glyn when he visited Pasadena and also knows Israel Reyes Larrea, an organizer with a group called Africa AC. But he is aware that many people in Morelos know little about

the social movement, and that some still resist the organizing effort. He says, “Even when I go back to Morelos now, people say, ‘I’m not African, what are you talking about. I’m Mexican!’”²² This shows the process of transnational racial formation. Hernando has been transformed by his experiences in the U.S. and, through his dual citizenship, brings his new concept of race back to his home village when he visits there. Then, he can challenge people in Morelos to think in new ways about their racial identity, completing the circle of transnational race formation identified by Tiffany Joseph (Joseph 2015).

In conclusion, all of these Costa Chicans living in Pasadena were generous and candid in revealing the details of their racial ideas and transformations. I argue that together, they illustrate a new wave of racial formation in a transnational setting which is different from the racial formation among their friends and relatives still living in Mexico. This new racial thinking is influenced by the globalization that shapes communities through travel and communication while, at the same time, forming a new kind of global citizenship. Pasadena may be located in Southern California, but the residents of this “little Costa Chica” are part Mexican, part American, part international. They represent the changing face of race, migration and social movements in a globalized world.

²² In this way, the legacy of *mestizaje* remains visible, when people still identify with the idea that Mexico is a non-racist nation without Blacks—the “nonblackness ideology” of *mestizaje* (Sue 2013, 17). It also shows that some people in the Costa Chica remain uneducated about the diaspora, which was mentioned by other scholars (Vaughn 2005; Weltman-Cisneros and Mendez 2013; Jerry 2013).

Chapter Four: The Grassroots Organizer and The Human Rights Advocate: Two Perspectives on the Movement for Afro-Mexican Rights and Recognition in the Costa Chica of Mexico

Sergio Peñaloza Pérez

The social movement for Afro-Mexican rights and recognition is a framework for studying the racial formation taking place in Pasadena and it makes this study more salient, given the new visibility of the movement following the first government survey which counted Blacks throughout Mexico in 2015. The movement is now 21 years old and Sergio Peñaloza Pérez, co-founder of Mexico Negro AC, has been active from the beginning. In his interview with me, Peñaloza highlights the need for a movement to gain collective rights for Afro-Mexicans and reinforces the findings of scholars who emphasize the need for broad alliances and international networks in building social movements (Muñoz 2006; Paschel 2016; Hanchard 1999). Peñaloza is mentioned by Laura Lewis who attended some of the early meetings of the group along with Peñaloza. She described him as a local teacher at the first meeting in 1997 and, later, as President of the Organizing Committee of Black Villages in 1999 (Lewis 2012). I interviewed Peñaloza by phone in his house in Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero, to learn about the uphill battle to voice the grievances of a community living in the shadows of society and the roadblocks to gaining constitutional recognition for Afro-Mexicans.

Peñaloza highlights many of the salient themes of this research, including the discrimination that affects the lives of the *Costeños*; the initial resistance to organizing or misunderstandings about the goals of organization; the tools used by social movements

including establishing a cultural identity, building strategic alliances and getting media exposure; and, the rivalries and political conflicts that can hinder a movement.

As for discrimination, because of the marginalization and invisibility of Afro-Mexicans, Peñaloza describes the current conditions in the Costa Chica in a simple way: “We are in bad shape!” He told me that because of “institutional discrimination,” the health care system is “reprehensible,” with a shortage of doctors, equipment and medicine. In the area of education, he said the schools are in “disrepair” without the TVs or the TV antennas necessary to broadcast lectures, and that secondary and technical schools do not have the laboratories or equipment they need.

The rise of this social movement came through the international influence of the Black Trinidadian Catholic priest Glyn Jemmott whose post was in el Ciruelo, Oaxaca a predominantly Black *pueblo*. Glyn Jemmott saw the necessity to break from the nationalistic and paternalistic idea of *mestizaje* and racial homogeneity of *mestizaje* that have caused this kind of racial discrimination and have kept the Afro-Mexicans marginalized. He describes the group’s founding this way:

Mexico Negro resulted from an announcement by father Glyn...He convened the first meeting of the organization of *Pueblos Negros* or Black villages. Those of us who participated in the organization of the first meeting decided it was necessary to become part of a civil organization with the goal of lending support to members of the Afro-Mexican community, namely because in 1997, when we had the first meeting, in October of that year, Hurricane Paulina touched down and we had to help the victims of the hurricane... And we saw the need to organize ourselves legally into a civil organization and that’s when we named it “Mexico Negro.”

And this is where international ideas about Black recognition entered the picture since Father Glynn was a Caribbean activist before he arrived in the Costa Chica. This resonates with what Hanchard states, that “Black intellectuals throughout the New World shared the impulse to reach back across the epochal boundary between slavery and

emancipation and the geographical boundary between Africa and points westward... [to give] some coherence to their present continuous lives...” In the Costa Chica, Father Glyn played a crucial role in organizing these Afro-Mexicans not only in religious terms, as their pastor, but also in terms of inspiring a movement for social justice and human rights. Peñaloza touches on this idea of international cooperation throughout his interview.

Peñaloza walks me through their first steps in local, national and international areas where the social movement in the Costa Chica has been breaking new grounds in airing issues of human rights and discrimination.

Peñaloza mentions:

We’ve been fighting to be constitutionally recognized... for equality and against discrimination for more than twenty years. And even though Mexico...is part of assemblies and signs onto [human rights] treaties...they have limited follow-through, at their convenience. For the past twenty years we have been telling the government to give us constitutional recognition and to include us in the census and to create political associations specifically for Afro-descendant peoples. And that hasn’t happened! Obviously, there have been baby steps because there is international pressure, the movement has grown. We were the first organization [of Black peoples]. Now there are about twenty in just the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca. This movement began just in the Costa Chica region...Today the movement has grown to national proportions.

In terms of resistance to the idea of organizing, Peñaloza admits that Black people “who got involved at the time didn’t quite understand” the goal and this includes himself. This is similar to researchers (Lewis 2012; Vaughn 2005) who point out that the social movement in the Costa Chica was “embraced with caution [and] skepticism” (Vaughn 2005, 56). The knowledge about human rights and discrimination Peñaloza has acquired through the years is a testament that education is part of the process: discovering and

framing the invisibility of Blacks, setting goals of racial inclusion and working with allies to achieve them.

Social movements use certain tools to achieve their goals and Peñaloza mentions several of them. He says early efforts to get government recognition for Afro-Mexicans were rejected by officials who echoed Hooker's criteria for collective rights (Hooker 2005). Government representatives told Peñaloza, "You are not an ethnic group. You don't have your own language and therefore you can't be counted as something besides what you already are [Mexican]." However, time and effort has been slowly giving some positive results for social movements in the Costa Chica—including some state level recognition for Black²³ and a national survey conducted in 2015 which counted Afro-Mexican for the first time. Another tool of social movements is public information, and Peñaloza told me, "We have managed to attract national—and even international—press. We have managed to make so much noise that the government now knows that we exist. Well, they always knew, but they denied it." In spite of limited resources, Costa Chicans have been able to make alliances with other social movements using the Internet, media and academia as a way to disseminate information. This is a strategy social movements in Mexico are able to use to attract the national and international attention. This is what Muñoz claims helped the Chiapas uprising succeed with NGOs. He writes, "The international human rights community served as a crucial ally for the Zapatista movements" (Muñoz 2006, 258). The internet and media reporting was crucial to keep the national and international allies updated and this strategy and its ripple effects were crucial for Zapatistas to gain recognition for indigenous People in Mexico (Muñoz 2006).

²³ Measures granting some recognition to Afro-Mexicans have been adopted in the states of Oaxaca, Guerrero, Veracruz and Mexico City.

Alliances have been important to the growth of Mexico Negro and the other civil organizations fighting for Afro-Mexican inclusion. Peñaloza says that since the first Black peoples meeting in November, 1997, more government institutions, academia and social movements across Mexico have been adding to the conversation and disseminating information about the Black struggle. So the meetings are now being held in other states, not only in Costa Chica region. Peñaloza comments:

At one point the meetings alternated each year between the Costa Chica of Guerrero and Oaxaca and now [it is expanding]. Last November [2017], it was held in the State of Veracruz because people from Veracruz are now participating and hosting. The next one, next November [2018] will be in Coahuila, in the community of Mascogos.²⁴ It's now been about three years since they first started participating in the meetings. There are meetings of Afro-descended people from all over the country as well as organizations of non-Afro-descendant peoples. And people come from other countries. This shows that the movement went from being local to being national with links to the international African [diaspora] movement. As such, the government is forced to respond to some demands concerning human rights violations.

However, there are difficulties and roadblocks. Peñaloza complains that some politicians have tried to co-opt the movement and use it for their own personal gains.

...The most uncomfortable component has certainly been the politicians. Unfortunately that part is uncomfortable, but necessary because in this authoritarian system the key that might open a door in one of these government institutions has been the politicians. But obviously this is a self-serving. They want to profit from the movement, politically speaking. And they want to steer the movement in directions that suit them. And [for me as a leader] that has been the uncomfortable part.

Peñaloza says politicians use economic leverage in trying to control the movement to their own agendas, by not giving funding or support for the Black meetings. He adds,

We have had to fight to keep politicians from manipulating or controlling our movement. And for November of this year, 2018, we'll be having our 19th meeting, which would have been the 21st event but because of financial difficulties there were two [years'] meetings we had to skip. We always struggle

²⁴ Mascogos are Blacks who allied with the Seminole indigenous people in the U.S. and moved to Coahuila, Mexico, in 1850 to escape slavery (Gil 2015, 25).

to make this event a reality. And because we do not allow [politicians] to control or manipulate the event, they threaten us to not give financial resources. There have even been times where we have had to threaten to block highways and those sort of things. We've never had to do it because at the end it gets resolved. Halfway, but it gets resolved!

Politicians have not been the only ones hindering the movement; there are also rivalries among the leaders of the various groups that are part of the Afro-Mexican movement.

...I have partners in the movement who are in the movement for political gains and sometimes for economic personal gain. One of the ideal strategies would be the unification of the movement. Unity! But...there are organizations that are run by someone who wants to be a public figure in the government and that's why they are in the movement...to land a political job.

At the end of the day what Afro-Mexicans are fighting for, as Peñaloza eloquently argues, are several important goals:

The primary goal of our organization is constitutional recognition! And then the fight is for equality and non-discrimination. Then the economic and social promotion of Afro-Mexican communities. Then the strengthening of our cultural traditions. One of our goals is the fight for the inclusion of the theme of Afro-descendants in Mexico in the content of all learning materials at all levels, among others.

While Peñaloza says some politicians have put self interest over the goals of the movement, he says Mexico Negro and the other movement groups have received vital support from three main political organizations in Mexico that have been actively involved with their struggles.

For example, INDAH [Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia], CONAPRED [Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación], and CNDH [Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos]...We can also add the academics as well as government institutions. So the movement hasn't just grown in numbers, it has also been strengthened by the participation on three foundational components: civil organizations, academics, and the political organizations.

At CNDH Peñaloza particularly mentioned the help of Dr. Helen Patricia Peña Martínez, the Director of ONG Internacionales for CNDH, who I had already interviewed by phone

from her office in Mexico City. Peñaloza says Peña Martínez has been an effective liaison between CNDH and the various civil organizations fighting for Afro-Mexican rights.

Dr. Helen Patricia Peña Martínez

Social movements succeed through broad alliances (Paschel 2016; Muñoz 2006; Hanchard 1999) and by this definition, Dr. Helen Patricia Peña Martínez is part of the social movement co-founded by Sergio Peñaloza, even though she is an official with a political organization, CNDH, which was originally established by the Mexican government.²⁵ As Paschel argues, in relation to Black mobilization in Brazil and Colombia, social movements can overcome “incredible odds” when they operate “...within a larger constellation of politics—that involves state actors as well as a myriad of different non state political actors, local and global...” (Paschel 2016, 15). Mexico Negro and the other organizations now fighting Afro-Mexican rights have helped Black Mexicans see race in a new way and have become the foundation for the transnational racial formation this study observed in Pasadena. Groups like CNDH help build this foundation.

In my interview with Dr. Peña Martínez, she focuses, first, on this importance for alliances and for international cooperation in building strong social movements. Second, she highlights what she calls the “structural racism” resulting from *mestizaje* which creates discrimination in many ways and prevents Afro-Mexicans from being treated

²⁵ Since 1990, The Comisión Nacional de los Derechos Humanos (CNDH) has operated independently of the government and is accredited at the United Nations.

equally and being recognized as a racial and cultural group by the Mexican government. And, finally, Peña Martínez talks about what needs to happen next in order for the social movement for Afro-Mexican rights to move forward.

I will examine these main points individually; first, I present Peña Martínez' position on the influence of alliances and international coordination in the fight for the rights of Black Mexicans. She pointed out that Father Glyn Jemmott was the primary inspiration in creating Mexico Negro AC, the first, and now the largest, of the civil organizations involved in the struggle for Black Mexican rights. Peña Martinez calls Glyn "an international symbol" of the movement.

A very concrete sign of the international influence was the work of Father Glyn. He was from Trinidad and Tobago and was one of the first people who began to organize for Afro-Mexican rights...He began to organize because Afro-Mexicans had not considered the importance of securing representation... [and organizing] in a way that would allow them to make contact with other regional and international organizations.

At this point, as the fight continues, Peña Martínez points to the continuing need for outside help.

We need to strengthen our Afro-Mexican [social] movements and organizations so that they are increasingly stronger so that they can grow their international connections so that the pressure on the government doesn't only come from the inside, but also from the outside. We need to use international organizations for that purpose.

Second, I will examine the harmful effects of *mestizaje*, its discourse of whitening, and the racial discrimination it brings to the lives of Afro-Mexicans. Peña Martínez points to *mestizaje* as being the root of this unequal treatment for Blacks in Mexico. She says:

...[*Mestizaje*] needs to be situated within its historical context. This corresponds with an evolving process. At that time it was probably necessary to secure the nationalist vision that the country needed. We're now in a different phase and I

believe that in this moment Mexico is completely ready—because this what’s happening in the world now—to recognize multiculturalism, to achieve constitutional recognition...Multiculturalism needs to reflect, for example, the recognition of people of African descent.

However, Peña Martínez suggests the move toward multiculturalism is not happening quickly enough. As a result of the whitening discourse of *mestizaje*, which is still part of the Mexican consciousness, Peña Martínez says, for example, that women of color often face discrimination, especially on the social media.

Just yesterday on Facebook I saw a reference to a young [Afro-Mexican] artist who would go to casting calls and they would only call her when they wanted her to portray a housekeeper. Even though she is a young woman with very pretty features, they would tell her that it would be very difficult—practically impossible—to give her a [different] role. That’s not only palpable in...the professional sector but also on the street...Women are often approached with propositions that reflect prejudice, that draw on stereotypes that because they are of African descent they are women who might be extremely sexually active, or things of that nature.

As another example of racial discrimination, Peña Martínez mentions the police checkpoints where Afro-Mexicans are stopped while traveling outside the Costa Chica. They are suspected of being undocumented Central American immigrants and are forced to sing the Mexican national anthem to prove their nationality. This is mentioned by researchers (López 2003, 1541; Weltman-Cisneros and Méndez 2013, 144); by several people I interviewed for this project in Pasadena; and, by director Jorge Pérez Solano in his film *La Negra*, which is analyzed in the final chapter of this study. Peña Martínez says:

...In the meetings and reunions of Black Mexicans, we are constantly reminded of the stories of how they [police] want to deport (Afro-Mexicans) to Guatemala...because ignorance is embedded in policy—a lack of awareness of the existence of Afro-descended people in Mexico. That’s another manifestation of structural discrimination...

Peña Martínez says government policies need to take into account the great racial and ethnic diversity that exists in Mexico and that means Afro-Mexicans need to be recognized.

Third, Peña Martínez spelled out the work that still needs to be done as part of the social movement for Afro-Mexican rights. Peña Martínez says Afro-Mexicans need to continue moving in a “step-by-step” process to gain “the collective right of recognition” in the Mexican constitution. The first step, she says, is to conduct sensitivity training for census workers and for the general public so that the 2020 census can give an accurate count of Afro-Mexicans. Peña Martínez acknowledges that members of the Afro-Mexican community believe the results of the 2015 questionnaire were not accurate, because there was so little understanding of African-ness in Mexico prior to the count. I would argue that people who have been taught that white is better than Black, through the official ideology of *mestizaje*, and who have faced discrimination because of their color, may not suddenly admit on a government questionnaire that they are Blacks. They have been told through the Mexican national ideology that they are *mestizo*, or mixed. At the same time, they generally have no knowledge of Africa or their African origins. I have found they do have strong awareness of their Blackness, but not of their African-ness and so they might easily be confused by a survey that asks, as this one did, whether they are Afro-Mexican or of African descent.

Peña Martínez also says recognition alone will not solve the problems Afro-Mexicans face and that public policy needs to be implemented evenly and equally. She said, “A very concrete example [of structural racism] is that public policy has not been applied to Afro-Mexicans, it has only reached indigenous communities...so, neglect is an

example of latent discrimination.” Also, Peña Martínez points out that there is very little representation of Afro-Mexicans in government—only a handful of Black Mexicans serve in the legislature and there are even fewer who are part of the judiciary or the executive branches of government. Here, an invisible people remain in the shadows because they have not been given a seat at the table.

Dr. Peña Martínez is a good example of someone helping to shape transnational racial formation through her work in coordinating a quasi-governmental agency with the various civil organizations which are trying to establish a better understanding of race and diversity in Mexico. She points to continuing discrimination as a reason more work needs to be done, and to the international nature of the fight against discrimination as a way to move ahead to achieve greater recognition and participation for Afro-Mexicans.

Chapter Five: *La Negra*: A Filmmaker And His Pioneering Effort to Bring Visibility to Afro-Mexicans on the Costa Chica

As this study has pointed out, many Afro-Mexicans from the Costa Chica are in the process of racial formation through migration across national boundaries. At the same time, racial ideas are also shifting for the Costa Chicans who live in Mexico. I argue their exposure to the social movement for Afro-Mexican rights and recognition, as well as exposure to their relatives and friends who have returned from the U.S. with new ideas, is transforming their conception of Blackness to see it more as a point of pride than as a negative trait. As part of this process, the image of these Afro-Mexicans that is conveyed to the outside world is important since mass media, including film, can play an important role in social movements. According to Muñoz, during the Chiapas rebellion in 1994, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) was able to use

“information politics” that played a key role in garnering public support for the movement. The organizers were able to “package their message” in such a way that information became “...crucial and ‘in itself a weapon’” (Muñoz 2006, 258). Muñoz also points to the importance of international allies in “‘getting the word out’ about movement causes; they serve to amplify or develop new opportunities for alliances” (257). While the Afro-Mexicans of the Costa Chica are not engaged in an armed uprising, they are trying to gain widespread attention to their cause. A film about Black Mexicans could do a lot to make this minority known, not only internationally but also among the Mexican people who know little about this invisible culture inside their own country. The film *La Negrada*, by Jorge Pérez Solano, comes at a crucial moment when Black social movements are gaining momentum, and it brings more empathy, sensitivity and recognition to Afro-Mexicans and the issue of racial equality in Mexico. I interviewed Solano by Skype from his home in Mexico City and I viewed his 2018 film on Amazon Prime.

In this chapter, I will first give an overview of the film and its creator as they relate to racial formation for Afro-Mexican people who are in the process of redefining and reshaping their concept of race. Second, I will analyze the controversy surrounding the film, which highlights the ways that the film is racialized by critics, especially those inside the movement for Afro-Mexican rights. Third, I will analyze some of the ways discrimination has affected the lives of Afro-Mexicans in the Costa Chica and how Solano describes the goal of the film in terms of bringing greater equality and social justice to this minority.

First, in terms of racial formation, *La Negra* represents a major shift, from a cultural angle, to include Black ethnicity in the conversation about race in Mexico, and it opened in one of the most prestigious cultural venues in Mexico City—the Cineteca Nacional.²⁶ Solano describes this cinema as “the best possible” place to watch a film—a place where “the sound is regulated, the light is regulated, [and] people can watch a film as it should be watched.” This kind of controlled environment would seem to ideal to using what Hernandez Cuevas calls

the capacity of film to transmit an idea with the advantages that are particular to this medium...to influence a frame through sound...to create an ambience to manipulate the general mood by the intensity, scarcity, or absence of light... and plotting a story in the style most convenient for a given cultural context... (Hernandez Cuevas 2001, 108).

Solano, a Mixtec indigenous²⁷ independent filmmaker from Oaxaca, produced and directed *La Negra* using non-professional Black actors from different towns around the Costa Chica, and it is filmed entirely on location in the region. The narrative is around the “*queridato*”—the fact that a man can have a wife as well as another two or three mistresses (and children with each woman), a practice which is socially accepted in the region. The film’s main character, Neri, goes back and forth between his two families, creating friction and intrigue along the way. The film is also a comment on the harsh conditions, poverty and poor infrastructure along the Costa Chica. It shows dusty streets and shaky *palapas*, and a hospital where Neri’s wife is treated for liver disease but released too soon, while she is still sick. Solano says tourists sometimes go to the region and find the “beauty of the landscape and nice weather,” but “once you start to look into

²⁶ Cineteca Nacional is part of the Secretaría de Cultura, a government agency to promote and protect film culture in Mexico.

²⁷ *Los nu savi, mixtecos*, or “*gente de lluvia*,” is a Native-American ethnic group located in the states of Guerrero, Oaxaca and Puebla. It is the fourth largest indigenous language group in Mexico (UNHCR).

it you become aware of some of the problems they face: lack of services, lack of education, unemployment.” Solano says one of his main goals in making the film was “To see on the Mexican big screen these forgotten faces, forgotten ways of life, and forgotten expressions. They haven’t been touched during the entire history of Mexican cinema. That was my objective.”

Solano literally is shedding light on the naked Black Mexican body—“the other”—a dark, brown and unknown part of Mexico (Mora 2017). They are marked by isolation and poverty, and as Mora says of the indigenous in Mexico, “Thirty years of neoliberal development policies have intensified conditions of poverty in these rural communities” (Mora 2017, 69). Solano and his Afro-Mexican actors have produced a film that gives extra momentum to a growing social movement by giving the Costa Chicans a face and a voice, which I argue will make them less “other” and more a part of the social fabric of Mexico. While creating this new visibility, Solano has also produced a vivid ethnography of individuals and communities that very few people ever see in person. The colors, the faces of the people, and the rich landscapes in the film all paint an intriguing picture of a region where race is being freed from the boundaries of *mestizaje* and is moving into a new racial space that celebrates difference. Solano’s lens acts like the sun shining on the leaves of a tree, transforming light into energy as photosynthesis does, making the tree lush and dense—stronger and more visible.

Second, I will explore the controversy surrounding *La Negra*. The film, and its director, have been criticized because apparently Solano referred to Blacks as “savages” during an interview with the newspaper *La Jornada*, when promoting the film. He is also accused of racism in repeating stereotypes about Afro-Mexicans and in the choice of the

title for the film. When I interviewed Solano about the movie he did not want to talk in detail about these controversies, but he did offer a defense that he is far from racist, being indigenous himself, and that his goals were to bring visibility to the Black communities and to help them participate in filmmaking for the first time.

Two groups involved in the social movement for Afro-Mexican rights, Mexico Negro AC and Afrodescendencias Mx wrote Solano a letter complaining about his use of the word “*salvajes*” (savages) in the interview, but also claiming the film “reproduced a number of unfortunate ideas and stereotypes about Afro-Mexicans in the Costa Chica...for example it represents them as lazy people, sexually promiscuous, ignorant, passive and mediocre.” The groups state they understand the film is a fiction, however, “we call attention to the importance of responsible communication, even more when there is a reference to a community that...historically has been subject to racism, prejudice and discrimination.” There has also been criticism of the film’s title because it considered by some to be derogatory. I will analyze the accusations separately; first the use of the word “*salvajes*,” then the claims about stereotypes, and finally the question of the film’s title.

Taking the issue of the word “*salvajes*,” I argue that Solano was simply being candid about what had been told to him by Blacks in the Costa Chica. Here is the complete quote from *La Jornada*, along with my translation:

El tono de piel que utilizo en la película no llega a lo totalmente negro que yo hubiera querido. Me dijeron que si me metía más iba a encontrar más negros, pero son más salvajes. Igual lo hago la próxima vez, allá se les llama azules o rojos, porque a cierta hora del día parece que desprenden un haz con esos tonos; bien bonito. Pero, o eran muy tímidos o muy salvajes, o no querían ni que me les acercara o me decían que les daba pena.
(The skin tone that I use in the movie does not reach the totally black [color] that I would have liked. They [Afro-Mexicans in the Costa Chica] told me that if I go

more deeply into other blacks towns, I would find more black but they are more wild. I might do it the next time, anyway. There they are called blue or red, because at a certain time of the day their color becomes more pronounced, very nice. But they were either overly timid or savages. They didn't want me to be near them because they were shy).

In the quote, Solano says that “they told me” that by going to some more remote villages, he would find people who are blacker, who are “*salvajes*.” It is possible they use this language about other Blacks and that he was repeating what they said, though Solano did not explain this to me because he wanted to avoid more controversy. This quote is also similar to researchers who have mentioned that residents of the Costa Chica often distance themselves from Blackness by directing academics to a different towns where the people are Blacker, or more pure Black (Vaughn 2005; Vaughn 2013; Lewis 2012, 7; Jerry 2013, 12). Those who told Solano about the other villages of “*salvajes*,” seem to be doing this same thing, creating a spatial distance between their own Blackness and some other, more true Blackness. I argue they do this partly to conform to the whitening discourse of *mestizaje*. Solano observed this same tendency toward whitening in another way, saying “...I did hear stories of women who wanted to marry white men because they didn't want their children to experience the same kind of discrimination they their parents did.”

In terms of stereotypes in the film, I argue Solano portrayed these stereotypes on purpose to highlight how Afro-Mexicans have adopted discriminatory attitudes that have been imposed upon them through the centuries, and have used them in a kind of racial and cultural formation—to distinguish themselves from the indigenous and the white populations and assert their own unique identity. For example, one character in the film

speaks directly to the camera and recites verses, or *coplas*²⁸ during short interludes throughout the film. In one of these scenes, the character recites, “I am handsome like no one else and lazy, too. Work is for natives and I’m *gente de razón!*” *Gente de razón* is the term the Spanish used to distinguish themselves from others who were non-Christian (Vinson 2018). However, it is used in this context to mean clever, and it seems that the Costa Chicans have applied the term to themselves, even though it originally meant white Christians, as way of racial formation meant to differentiate themselves from the indigenous. Other characters in the film call each other lazy, but it is not likely the Afro-Mexicans actually see themselves as lazy. After all, as Lewis points out, the Blacks have a “generally higher socioeconomic status” than the indigenous and must have achieved it through hard work (Lewis 2012, 26). The origin of the idea of laziness among Afro-Mexicans was explained to Anthony Jerry by a woman in the Costa Chica. Jerry writes,

She explained to me that many men have to wake up very early in the morning in order to work with the tides and natural rhythm of fishing life. This means that in the middle of the day, one might see many men laying around in hammocks and appearing to lazily waste the day away. According to this woman, this is a misunderstanding, as the men have been working all night and into the early morning (Jerry 2013, 143).

Solano’s inclusion of the idea of laziness would appear to be part of his goal of accuracy and authenticity in portraying the Costa Chicans, since they are clearly aware of the stereotype and so it is part of their collective knowledge. Also, as I mentioned in the introduction to this study, I can verify from my experience growing up in the Costa Chica that Blacks are often perceived as being lazy. I often heard people say that, although it was not said by the Afro-Mexicans themselves.

²⁸ Coplas are short, rhyming story, often humorous or sarcastic, which are popular in the coastal region.

Another stereotype is that Blacks are oversexed and promiscuous. In the film, the character who recites the *coplas* says, “I am the hottest Black man in the land...Come to my arms, *morena*, and you’ll be satisfied.” And later in the film, a group of women takes turns reciting *coplas*. One of them says, “*Negro*, if you loved me, it might well be my death. As soon as you saw my *asuntito* (my business), you would be frightened. I swear *chaparrito* (shorty), even with Viagra you couldn’t keep up with me.” This is a stereotype that was reproduced even by Vasconcelos, the main advocate of *mestizaje* in the 1920s. As he argued for the “cosmic race” he referred to Blacks as “...eager for sensual joy, intoxicated with dances and unbridled lust” (Vasconcelos 1925, 22). It is no wonder stereotypes are stubborn when they are repeated by the people who created the political racism of *mestizaje*—an ideology designed to whiten the population and erase blacks from the Mexican consciousness.

In terms of the film’s title, the critics of *La Negra* say the title is demeaning to Blacks. In the opening titles of the film, it is explained that this term *La Negra* is “used by Black people to refer to themselves and comes from the discontent they felt and still feel for the racial slur.” Solano does address this issue in the interview for this project. He said,

...If the title offends some people, what I am trying to achieve is for that word to be not offensive. For it to be, like, I am Black and I accept myself as I am. Maybe I am wrong, but people make decisions based on their experiences. Like I say, I’m Indian, but I’m not 100% Indian, and I wish I were. I am Mixtec, but I don’t speak Mixtec. I would have loved to have thought as a Mixtec. I think that’s what’s interesting about the title, and for them [Costa Chicans] to self-identify as *negros*.

Solano says he discussed this issue with the actors before filming and learned that the term is “perceived by many to be offensive.” He says that as a teenager, he used to get “mad and embarrassed” when people called him an Indian. But as he studied more

and learned about his native culture, he came to accept and respect his Mixtec roots. “Taking the negative edge away from the word helped me a lot to accept myself as I am...” The filmmaker here acknowledged the process of racial formation he experienced in relation to his indigenous ancestry, while, at the same time, the subjects of his film were forming new racial understandings through exposure to the process of filmmaking and from being noticed in a new way by the outside world.

In general, Solano seemed surprised by the criticism from Afro-Mexican groups and said it was “disconcerting,” although the film did receive positive reviews and it won an award for best cinematography at the Guadalajara International Film Festival 2018. Solano told me,

Controversial or not...It’s a first step...We brought them [the Costa Chicans] the opportunity to participate in something they were unfamiliar with and to get paid for it. We incentivized them...Is it difficult? Yeah, it’s very difficult! But what thing in the world that is worthwhile isn’t? I believe that this project, in spite of anything we lost, anything we gained, was worth it. It’s hard work, the reaction from the public is ambiguous, but I think that is better than having it not exist...It’s better for the film to be out, for it be spoken about and discussed—in good terms or bad terms—but to be part of the conversation.

Third, and finally, I will look at some of Solano’s goals in making the film and how it could help overcome the marginalization and discrimination *Costeños* experience. Solano told me his goal was not only to bring greater visibility for Afro-Mexicans, but also to create opportunities for the *Costeños* to work in the film industry. He says that currently he’s unaware of any Black filmmakers, authors, screenwriters, in Mexico and he wants to change that. He says he hopes other filmmakers will also see the “possibilities this region offers for storytelling” in spite of the difficulties they might face.

It’s been a hard process, a harsh process, and sometimes agonizing. You get these attacks that suggest that you are racist. And I stop to think, what kind of a racist

could I be who spends four years of my life with them (Afro-Mexicans), making this film with them, bringing them work? I need a bit of therapy!

The film portrays a culture that until recently was ignored. As Solano says, the people of the Costa Chica “have a series of very interesting [cultural] manifestations.” He mentions dances, like the Danza de los Diablos, that was interpreted by Andrés in my interviews. Also,

They have some very interesting foods such as *tichinda* (mussels), different techniques for cooking fish...I think it would be important for all of that to be more integrated into our society...I hope the film can help a little bit with that. To make people realize that this other reality exists on the coast of Oaxaca.

These cultural distinctions relate to Hooker when she says minorities have a better chance to gain rights when they are seen as distinct cultural groups (Hooker 2014). Solano, at the end of his film, makes an indirect reference to Hooker in a series of titles just before the credits. They read: “In Mexico, Afro-descendant communities do not constitute a cultural reference. The lack of specific cultural features, such as language, government or territory have not allowed their claims as a people, a nation or a culture.” However, I would argue the Afro-Mexicans are a distinct cultural group, because of their long ties to their coastal villages, their African racial heritage, their unique speech patterns explained by Alberto in this study, their oral history of a ship that brought people directly to the Costa Chica, as well as their dances, food and music. These qualities may not fit Hooker’s terms exactly, but should be recognized in granting equal rights to Afro-Mexicans.

Two other points related to discrimination against Afro-Mexicans are highlighted in *La Negrada*. In one scene, Neri’s daughter was pulled off a bus because she was Black. The police officer tells her, “You’re not Mexican. Where are you from *negra?*” She is forced to sing the national anthem to prove her nationality. This same

scenario is told by authors (Archibold 2014; Jerry 2013, 18) and by three interlocutors in this study.²⁹ It is humiliating for these Afro-Mexicans to be suspected of being undocumented immigrants from Central America just because of their skin color and because the police often do not understand there are Blacks in Mexico. The Blacks are treated like strangers in their own land. People told Solano about these experiences and that is what inspired the scene in the movie:

They would say to me, ‘We speak like Mexicans...we feel like Mexicans, yet people don’t believe we are Mexicans.’ That’s the hardest part of what they describe...along with discrimination, along with the lack of resources and the inability to obtain resources to start businesses, to develop their farming, their fishing. They need that, yet they don’t manage to achieve it.

Another sign of discrimination is the distrust Solano faced when he first came to the Costa Chica proposing to make a film. He says, “At first, people are incredulous. They just don’t believe you.” Solano says this arises from past encounters in which Afro-Mexicans were “misled” by outsiders. “They told me themselves that people would come and tell them they were going to begin a project. ‘They would take photos of us, they would record us, and then we would never see them again.’” This corresponds to what I observed in Pasadena: At first the Afro-Mexicans were reluctant to talk; I had to gain their trust before they would open up and agree to be interviewed. It is also similar to what Lewis found when residents of the Costa Chica resisted outside organizers (Lewis 2012, 152). And it reminds me of Loperena’s claims that some people felt new development was exploiting the local Garifuna communities in Honduras without providing solid benefits to local individuals or communities (Loperena 2016). People

²⁹ Alberto, was stopped when he was 18 while riding a bus to reach the U.S. border; André’s son was pulled off a bus because he was with some people who were darker than he was; and Hernando repeats stories he’s heard about Black being detained and forced to sing the Mexican national anthem to prove they are Mexican.

who live on the margins of society are often the most vulnerable to being misled and exploited. They experienced hundreds of years of this abuse and so it is understandable they would build protective mechanisms against outside influence.

In conclusion, Jorge Pérez Solano can be seen as an important voice in the social movement for Afro-Mexican rights, even though he is an artist, not an activist, and the film is fiction, not a documentary. His film, *La Negrada*, puts a face on a racial struggle, and makes a clear statement that, in spite of what Mexicans may believe, there *are* Blacks in Mexico, they face continuing racial discrimination, and they need to be recognized and respected.

Conclusion

This thesis investigates the lives of the Afro-Mexican community living in Pasadena, California, to examine how their transnational migration shapes their awareness of racial identity in a new geographical and political environment. The research found that these Afro-Mexicans' exposure to a different society and culture corresponds to their rethinking of Blackness while learning more about the African diaspora and embracing more completely the social movement for Afro-Mexican rights. In terms of attitudes toward race and racial self-identity, this study found the interlocutors take pride in being Black (and identify as Black or Afro-Mexican) more than previous research indicates for their families and friends still living in the Costa Chica. In terms of new knowledge, the Pasadena Afro-Mexicans say they now have an understanding of their relationship to the African diaspora, a knowledge they did not have before migrating to the U.S. and which previous scholars have noted is mostly lacking in

the Costa Chica. This study found the Afro-Mexican community in Pasadena is experiencing and redefining race in ways unique to their time, place and social history.

Since the social movement for Afro-Mexicans is part of the racial formation process for Afro-Mexican communities both in Mexico and the U.S., this thesis also analyzes the work of three people who are fighting for Afro-Mexican inclusion and equality—a grassroots organizer, a human rights advocate and a filmmaker. It found that strategic alliances, both local and international, are key to progress and that significant barriers arise in terms of political interference and ambition, as well as rivalries among leaders of the various groups involved in the movement. As Sergio Peñaloza pointed out in this study, unity would be a key to continuing the movement successfully. This study also found that efforts to expand awareness and visibility for Afro-Mexicans can be controversial, as we see in the case of *La Negra*. The same groups that would be expected to welcome the film were actually opposed to it because of the way they perceived the title and the depiction of the Afro-Mexicans. This points to the difficulties of racial formation in a social and political setting where different groups racialize the movement and its methods in different ways.

This thesis points to important areas for future research. For example, the question arises: Is the migrant community in Pasadena gaining greater awareness of Blackness, the diaspora and the movement because they are located in the progressive political environment of California? Would another Afro-Mexican community, for example the one in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, show the same pride in being Black and the same knowledge and acceptance of the diaspora and the social movement for Afro-Mexican rights?

Another question would be: Is there still a significant portion of the Pasadena Afro-Mexican community that diverges from the findings in this study? In other words, are they less likely to embrace Blackness and understand the social movement and the diaspora? A more quantitative approach to the same research questions in this study might reveal the answer. This could be done through surveys, questionnaires and a quantitative analysis of the data.

Future research could also analyze whether the Costa Chica community in Mexico is influenced in their racial formation by communication with those in Pasadena who have reconfigured their own racial perceptions. It is expected they would be influenced, especially since social media increases the speed of communication in a transnational way. As we see in Joseph, those in Mexico would likely be more aware of Blackness and its global meaning, and more aware of the diaspora and of the movement for Afro-Mexican rights because of their contact with friends and family in Pasadena.

This research project is a snapshot in time (a concept I borrow from Jerry), trying to temporarily freeze a changing process in order to examine and analyze it. However, the process is ongoing and constantly shifting, and can be studied again in the future as racial formation in a transnational setting continues to change for Afro-Mexicans.

References

- Aguirre Beltrán, Gonzalo. *La Poblacion Negra de Mexico*. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1972.
- Archibold, Randall C. “Negro? Prieto? Moreno? A Question of Identity for Black Mexicans.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Oct. 25, 2014.
- Bonfil Batalla, Guillermo. *Mexico Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996.
- Clarke, Kamari M, and Deborah A. Thomas. *Globalization and Race: Towards an Understanding of Transformation in Blackness 2004*. New Haven: Yale Center for International and Areas Studies, 2004.
- De la Fuente, Alejandro. *Race, Inequality and Politics in Twenty-Century Cuba*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001.
- Dill, Lakai and Louise Greathouse Amador. “El Pueblo Negro: Identity Politics in Mexico.” *The Journal of Latin American Policy* 5, no. 1, (2014): 87-114.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Mask*. New York: Grove Press, 1952.
- Galeano, Eduardo. *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of Pillage of A Continent*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1997.
- Gil, Rocío. “The Mascogo/Black Seminole Diaspora: The Intertwining Borders of Citizenship, Race, and Ethnicity.” *Latin American and Caribbean Ethnic Studies* 9, no.1 (2014): 23-43.
- Government of Mexico. “Mexico’s Constitution of 1917 With Amendments Through

2015.” ConstituteProject.org.

https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Mexico_2015.pdf?lang=en

Hanchard, Michael. “Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics, and the African Diaspora.”

Public Culture 11, no.1 (1999): 245-268.

Hernández Cuevas, Marco Polo. “The Erasure of the Afro Element of Mestizaje in

Modern Mexico.” PhD diss., University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 2001.

Hernández-Díaz, Jorge. “Reconstrucción de la Negritud y Políticas del Reconocimiento

Afrodescendientes en Oaxaca.” (Accepted for publication in the *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology*—date undetermined). 2018.

Hernández, Tanya Katerí. Review of *Racism on Trial: The Chicano Fight for Justice*, by

Ian F. Haney López. *California Law Review* 92, no.5 (2003): 1537-1551.

Hooker, Juliet. “Indigenous Inclusion/Black Exclusion: Race, Ethnicity and Multicultural

Citizenship in Latin America.” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 37, no.

2 (2005): 285-310.

Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía. “Encuesta Intercensal 2015.”

http://www.beta.inegi.org.mx/contenidos/proyectos/enchogares/especiales/intercensal/2015/doc/especiales2015_12_3.pdf

Jerry R, Anthony. “Chasing Blackness: Re-Investing Value and Mexico’s Changing

Racial Economy.” PhD diss., University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, 2013.

Jones, Anne Meri Jennifer. “Making Race in the New South: Mexican Migration and

Race Relations in Winston-Salem, North Carolina.” Phd. diss., University of

California, Berkeley, 2011.

— — —. “Mexicans Will Take Jobs That Even Blacks Will Not Do: An Analysis of

- Blackness, Regionalism and Invisibility in Contemporary Mexico.” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 10 (2013): 1564-1581.
- Joseph, Tiffany. *Race on the Move: Brazilian Migrants and The Global Reconstruction of Race*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015.
- Kymlicka, Will and Wayne Norman. “Citizenship in Culturally Diverse Societies: Issues, Contexts, Concepts.” In *Citizenship in Diverse Societies*, edited by Will Kymlicka and Wayne Norman. 1-42. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Lewis, Laura A. *Chocolate and Corn Flour: History, Race, and Place in the Making of “Black” Mexico*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012.
- Loperena, Christopher A. “Conservation by Racialized Dispossession: The Making of an Eco-Destination on Honduras’s North Coast.” *Geoforum* 69, (2016): 184-193.
- Mora, Mariana. “Ayotzinapa and the Criminalization of Racial Poverty in La Montaña, Guerrero, Mexico.” *PoLaR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review* 40, no. 1 (2017): 67-85.
- Michell, John L. “A Real Blended Family.” *Los Angeles Times*, (Los Angeles, Cal.) April 13, 2008.
- Muñoz, José A. “International Opportunities and Domestic Protest: Zapatistas, Mexico And the New World Economy.” *Social Movement Studies* 5, no. 3 (2016): 251-274.
- Ong, Aihwa. *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Paschel, Tianna S. *Becoming Black Political Subjects: Movements and Ethno-Racial Rights in Colombia and Brazil*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.

- Perry, Marc D. *Negro Soy Yo: Hip Hop and Raced Citizenship in Neoliberal Cuba*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016.
- Roland, L. Kaifa. *Cuban Color in Tourism and La Lucha: An Ethnography of Racial Meanings*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Sue, Christina A. *Land of the Cosmic Race: Race Mixture, Racism, and Blackness in Mexico*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Telles, Edward, René D. Flores and Fernando Urrea-Giraldo. "Pigmentocracies: Educational Inequality, Skin Color and Census Ethnoracial Identification in Eight Latin American Countries." *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility* 40, (2015): 39- 58.
- Trejo, Guillermo and Melina Altamirano. "The Mexican Color Hierarchy: How Race and Skin Tone Still Define Life Chances 200 Years After Independence." In *The Double Bind: The Politics of Racial & Class Inequalities in the Americas*, edited by Julia Hooker and Alvin B. Tillery, Jr., 3-16. Washington, D.C: American Political Science Association, 2016.
- United Nations Refugee Agency— Mexico: Situation and Treatment of Mixtec Indigenous People. <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3df4be6f14.html>
- Vasconcelos, José. *La Raza Cosmica*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.
- Vaughn, Bobby. "The African Diaspora Through Ojos Mexicanos: Blackness and Mexicanidad in Southern Mexico." *Review of Black Political Economy* 33, no. 1 (2005): 49-57.
- — —. "Blacks in Mexico-A Brief Overview," Mexconnect, 2008.

- <http://www.mexconnect.com/articles/1934-blacks-in-mexico-a-brief-overview>.
- — —. “Mexico Negro: From the Shadows of Nationalist Mestizaje to New Possibilities in Afro-Mexican Identity.” *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 6, no. 1 (2013): 227-240.
- Vincent, Ted. “The Blacks Who Freed Mexico.” *The Journal of Negro History* 79, no. 3 (1994): 257-276.
- Vinson, Ben III. “Black Mexico and the Historical Discipline.” In *Black Mexico: Race and Society from Colonial to Modern Times*, edited by Ben Vinson III and Mathew Restall, 1-18. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009.
- — —. *Before Mestizaje: The Frontiers of Race and Caste in Colonial Mexico*. Cambridge: University Press, 2018.
- Wade, Peter. *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*. New York: Pluto Press, 2010.
- Weltman-Cisneros, Talia and Candelaria Donají Méndez Tello. “Negros-Afromexicanos Recognition and the Politics of Identity in Contemporary Mexico.” *Journal of Pan African Studies* 6, no. 2 (2013): 140-156.
- Young, Iris Marion. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

