Representations of the Black Body in Mexican Visual Art

Evidence of an African Historical Presence or a Cultural Myth?

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Although Africans have been present in Mexico since the time of the initiation of the Afro-Atlantic slave trade, the larger Mexican culture seems to have forgotten this aspect of its history. Although the descendents of these original Africans continue to live in the communities of coastal Oaxaca, Guerrero, and Veracruz states, many Mexicans seem to be unaware of their existence. This article reviews works of visual art made from the 1700s through the present that represent images of Mexicans of African descent and provide evidence of a historical Afromestizo presence in Mexico. The works are also considered as possible sources of evidence about prevailing attitudes about Mexicans of African descent and anxieties about race mixing. This article provides a brief overview of Mexico’s historical relationship with Africa as a participant in the Afro-Atlantic slave trade and considers the work of muralists, painters, and photographers who have created works of art in various regions of the country.

Keywords: Mexico; Afromestizo; Afro-Mexican; black body; visual art

Although Africans have been present in Mexico since the time of the initiation of the Afro-Atlantic slave trade (Rincón Perez, 2003), the larger Mexican culture seems to have forgotten this aspect of its history. In contemporary Mexico, although the descendents of these original Africans continue to live in the communities of coastal Oaxaca, Guerrero, and Veracruz states, many Mexicans seem to be unaware of their existence.

Psychologist and philosopher Carl Jung (1956) describes the “shadow” of a group or culture as that psychological aspect that is not acknowledged and remains buried in the collective unconscious. It is as if Mexico’s historical relationship with Africa and Africa’s contribution to Mexican culture, described by Aguirre Beltrán (1989) and others as Mexico’s “third root,” comprises the unacknowledged shadow side of Mexico’s cultural identity.
Jung (1956) has described repression as the mechanism by which themes or ideas that present a psychological conflict are buried in the unconscious. Over time, the person or group pretends that the difficult subject or occurrence does not exist until it is no longer consciously available and is “effectively forgotten.” Even though Mexico’s African history is mirrored in the faces of and invigorates the coiffures of Mexicans in places like Zacatecas and Mexico City, the African contribution to Mexican history and culture is often an uncomfortable and frequently denied topic of conversation, even among Mexicans of the educated classes.

The purpose of this article is to search for evidence of Mexico’s African third root, demonstrated in works of visual art made from the 1700s to the present. This investigation will include a consideration of the kinds of representations that have been made of peoples of African descent that provide a clue about popular opinions concerning Africans in Mexico and Mexicans of African descent historically and in contemporary times.

I will consider works including paintings, murals, and photographs. Following the review, the visual evidence will be used to formulate an opinion about whether the collective repression of the memory of Africa’s contribution to Mexican culture and history is justified.

**Historical Overview**

Of the present-day regions that originally composed New Spain at the time of the Afro-Atlantic slave trade, the countries that imported the largest numbers of enslaved Africans were the regions that are present-day Peru and Mexico. The need for enslaved African labor was related to the genocide of the indigenous population that occurred after the arrival of the Spanish colonists in the first half of the 16th century. According to Aguirre Beltrán (1989), 97% of the indigenous population died in the decades following the colonists’ arrival. At the beginning of the 15th century, Aguirre Beltrán estimated the indigenous population in Mexico to be 27,650,000. By 1595, the indigenous population had declined to 1,375,000.

The cause of the indigenous deaths has historically been attributed to the epidemics brought by the Spanish, such as smallpox and measles, against which the indigenous population had no natural resistance. Aguirre Beltrán (1989) also identifies culture shock as a causal factor in the extermination of the indigenous groups. According to Aguirre Beltrán, the colonists’ attempts to change nearly all aspects of the indigenous life and culture, including economic systems, social organization, religion, art, and language, imposed a
psychological and sociological stress so significant that it contributed to the populations’ physical demise. The residual aspects of the indigenous culture retained by the 2% to 3% of the population that survived were eventually blended with the Africans’ culture in the geographic areas in which the indigenous and African groups lived in close proximity and intermarried. The resultant blending of the groups’ practices, beliefs, and biological heritage resulted in a *mestizaje*, or cultural blending. The African-descended cultural group is often referred to as *Afromestizo*, and the group’s cultural contribution is known as Mexico’s third root (Aguirre Beltrán, 1989), derived mostly of North American indigenous and African origins.

**Geography**

Importantly, enslaved Africans in Mexico lived not only in the areas that are presently known as coastal Oaxaca, Guerrero, and Veracruz states. Rather, they were widely distributed in the region (Aguirre Beltrán, 1989; Guevara Sanguines, 2001; Rincón Perez, 2003). Enslaved Africans worked in the mines of Guanajuato, in textile mills in Querétero, in oyster fisheries in Veracruz, and also in Michoacán state and in urban centers such as the cities of Puebla and the capital, Mexico City.

In her book *Esclavos Africanos en la Ciudad de México: El Servicio Domestico durante el Siglo XVI* (African slaves in Mexico City: Domestic servants in the 16th century), Mondragón Barrios (1999) describes the environment in which urban enslaved Africans lived and worked. According to Mondragón Barrios, enslaved Africans were valued as economic assets and were considered in the marriage decisions and contracts of affluent couples. Enslaved Africans worked as coachmen, shoemakers, weavers, blacksmiths, carpenters, and cooks.

An image of an enslaved African washerwoman is presented as a figure in a ceramic tile mosaic that accompanies Modragon Barrios’s essays. The woman is wearing a gathered blouse and a pleated skirt. Her skin is very dark, which contrasts sharply with her white blouse, the whites of her eyes, and the white garment she is washing. She is kneeling and leans forward toward the washing stone over which she is passing the white garment. Her hands are partially covered.

This image employs contrast to emphasize her blackness, or otherness, and her low status as an enslaved woman. The distinction between the coloring of her skin and the surrounding areas, along with her hairstyle, closely woven to the head suggesting braids, denote her non-European,
African physical characteristics, which are distinct from those of indigenous North American groups. Her kneeling posture is a gesture of submission. Her partially covered hands indicate her restraint or confinement as a woman in bondage and, as a result, her inability to act or fully express her ideas or intentions.

Symbolically, the washing stone represents the self and also the woman’s identity as a washerwoman who is enslaved. The act of washing represents transformation. Perhaps the image suggests the possibility for the woman’s personal transformation: from dark and African to light and European, from enslaved to free. The act of washing may also be considered a ritual of cleansing, perhaps predicting the purging of the memory of the African presence from Mexico’s acknowledged cultural history.

In the area that is presently the state of Veracruz, African labor was required for successful sugar production. Enslaved Africans worked in all aspects of production, from planting and agriculture to processing and refinement. On Veracruz plantations enslaved Africans were recorded as working as carpenters, masons, blacksmiths, weavers, and potters (Carroll, 2001).

In the area that is now Guanajuato state, enslaved Africans were introduced because of the need for workers in the newly discovered silver mines. Guevara Sanguines (2001) notes that in 1578, 400 enslaved Africans were counted in Guanajuato. According to Guevera Sanguines, slavery in Guanajuato was a much smaller business than in other commercial centers like Mexico City. The *palenques* (communities of escaped slaves) were easily accessible in the Sierra surrounding Guanajuato, and enslaved Africans frequently escaped and sought refuge there. Enslaved Africans did not satisfactorily meet miners’ needs for workers because of their poor adaptation to the physical characteristics of the Guanajuato environment. The discrepancy between the climate and altitude of the regions from which the enslaved Africans originated and the mountainous region of Guanajuato made them poorly suited for the demands of the physical work in the mines. The areas of West Africa where the Africans lived prior to enslavement are humid, tropical, and at sea level. The demands of the work in the mines of Guanajuato, at an altitude of 2,017 meters, were reported to cause cardiovascular problems and deaths among the African workers.

In 1955, Mexican muralist José Chávez Morado depicted Guanajuato’s history related to slavery in a work on the walls and ceiling of the Museo Alhóndiga in Guanajuato city, the capital of Guanajuato state. The emotional tone of the piece is dark, as is the palette Chávez Morado selected. The mural depicts a scene within the hull of a slave ship. The enslaved Africans’ skin is black or very dark brown. Two Africans are shackled to a
Figure 1
Mural on the Walls of the Museo Alhóndiga de Granaditas, Guanajuato, Mexico, by José Chávez Morado c. 1955

Note: Photograph copyright Wendy Phillips (2004).
wood frame. Their affect is flat, and one has possibly already succumbed to death. Another sits with his face buried in his knees in a gesture of extreme hopelessness. In the center, a man appears to be rising up from the floor of the ship; however, upon closer inspection, chains on his wrists are revealed as the mechanism that holds him suspended above the others. All of the men’s bodies are emaciated, their bones protruding through sagging skin. In the background, water pours in through a hole in the ship’s bow. The ship is unbalanced, and it is obvious that it is sinking (see Figure 1).

Adjacent to the images, Chávez Morado has placed a quote from Miguel Hidalgo, a leader of the Mexican independence movement and the struggle to abolish slavery in Mexico: “‘Because slavery does not exist in the natural world and was created by man, it is for this reason abolished’ 1810.”

The mural’s imagery refers to the darkness of slavery as a part of Mexico’s history and suggests shame about Mexico’s participation in the Afro-Atlantic slave trade. The representation of the bodies of the enslaved Africans in an emaciated state together with their hopeless and expressionless faces acknowledges the physical and psychic toll slavery exacted on the Africans in Guanajuato.

The water pouring into the ship symbolically suggests the potential for transformation or purification—the abolition of slavery. In the mural, the ship is unbalanced and sinking, also a metaphor for the abolition of slavery. The sea is also a symbol for the unconscious, of the recollection of the events that the individual or group are not able to bring to conscious memory. The sinking of the ship and its human cargo into the depths of the sea also seems to represent contemporary Mexicans’ repression of the memory of Mexico’s participation in the Afro-Atlantic slave trade. As the ship sinks into the depths of the sea, the memory of slavery as a part of Mexico’s past has been submerged in the depths of the collective unconscious. The memory and acknowledgement of this part of Mexico’s history continues to be irretrievable even for many educated Mexicans living in contemporary society.

A mural by the painter Villalprado Muñoz on the walls of the restaurant of the Hotel Hacienda de Cobos in the city of Guanajuato depicts a scene of the life of the city’s miners (see Figure 2). It is not clear when the imagined scene takes place (the work is undated and without other identifying information) or whether it represents the period before or after the abolition of slavery. The tone of the work is dreamlike and mythical; the town’s buildings are in soft pastel colors. A stone fence encircles the town and provides protection.

Above and outside the fence, laborers walk in the company of sirenlike women. The men, one Black and one with light skin, are dressed as mine workers. The lighter skinned worker wears a shirt and a miner’s hat. He holds
a hammer. The Black man wears trousers, and his chest is bare. He wears huaraches (Mexican handmade sandals) on his feet. The lighter skinned man faces a woman who wears a white gown and holds a light. The Black miner carries a naked White woman on his back, grasping her buttocks and thighs. Behind the couple, a serpent uncoils and breathes fire on the woman’s neck. In the upper portion of the painting in the center, a White Madonna and her child oversee the scene. Her hand is raised as if to offer a blessing.

The scene is tranquil; life in the town is serene and protected. The workers, their labor in the mines, and their involvement with the sirens are outside of the protection of the wall. The difference between the Black and the White mine workers’ clothing denotes differences between them with respect to status and social class. The White worker is equipped with protective clothing and the miner’s hat and hammer that are necessary for his work. The Black miner is not protected: His chest is bare, and his huarache sandals do not provide protection from the dangerous elements in the mine. His sandals also identify him as a peasant, a member of the lower class for whom few opportunities for social and educational improvement are available. His bare chest also suggests an unchecked hypersexuality.
Each miner is accompanied by a woman. The lighter skinned miner faces a woman who is dressed in white, a symbol of purity. Their face-to-face position suggests communication and relationship. The Black miner carries a woman on his back, as he would transport cargo out of the mine. His grasp on the woman’s thighs and buttocks suggests an overt, uncontrolled expression of sexuality. The carrying posture (the man’s back toward the woman’s face) suggests a relationship that is not communicative; rather, it is a sexual relationship between man and an object. Behind the woman, a snake rises up and breathes fire on her neck. The snake is a symbol for libido (Jung, 1956). The symbol of the snake may be interpreted as a warning of the danger of the Black man, his overt sexuality, and his impending sexual relationship with the White woman. The snake is also a symbol that represents the shadow, according to Jung, the aspect of the self or culture that has not been acknowledged. In this case, the snake refers to the unacknowledged historical presence of Africans in Mexico and their relationship to the larger population, including interpersonal, romantic, and sexual relationships.

The Madonna above the scene protects the townspeople from the dangers outside of the city’s walls, including the danger of sexual relationships between Black (African) men and White (European) women. This scene refers to repressed, unconscious attitudes about the historical presence of Blacks in places like the mining towns of central Mexico and of the sexual relationships between the races, which in fact were a part of Mexican history and were essential to the development of its cultural blending, or mestizaje.

Importantly, during the 1700s, Africans and Mexicans of African descent were present throughout much of the region that is contemporary Mexico. For example, in addition to visual records, their presence was officially recorded in the census and was discussed by the anthropologist Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán (1989) in his book, *La Población Negra de México* (The African population of Mexico). In 1742, in a survey that included Mexico City, Tlaxcala, Oaxaca, Michoacán, Nuevo Galicia, Yucatán, and Chiapas, Africans and Afromestizos were present in all of the regions surveyed (see Table 1).

Colonial European and Mexican artists were fascinated by the prospects for racial mixing created by the presence of Africans, North American indigenous groups, and Europeans sharing the same spaces. The artistic genre called casta painting involved the creation of a series of drawings or paintings of what the artist imagined to be the offspring that resulted from the union of a man and woman from different racial groups, or castas.

In colonial Mexico, a complex system of racial classification was developed to identify an individual’s social position and relative Whiteness
(Europeanness), Africanness, or indigenousness, depending on the racial background of the parents (Katzew, 2004). For example, the union of a European and a Black produced a Mulata, who was considered to be 50% Black and 50% European. A European and a Mulata produced a Cuarterona (25% Mulata), and a European and a Cuarterona produced and Ocharona (one eighth Mulata). When Ocharono and Ocharona produced a child, the African blood was said to be effectively purged, producing a White child (Gumilla, 1791). In this system, Blacks occupied the lowest castas, below the indigenous groups. Among 18th-century Mexicans, Black ancestry was the least desirable racial and cultural attribute.

Generally, artists made sets of 16 casta paintings depicting the imagined process of miscegenation, considering all of the parental combinations possible derived from the original European, indigenous, and African lines. The combinations were considered in an almost mathematical way. Each of the images of the set shows a man and woman of a stated casta and their imagined offspring (Katzew, 2004).

For example, a work attributed to Juan Rodriguez Juárez, circa 1715, is titled de Lobo y India produce Lobo que es Torna Atrás (The offspring of a wolf [Black man] and an Indian woman produces a wolf that is transformed backwards—toward Africanness). A Lobo, according to the definitions of the casta hierarchy, is the product of the union of an African man and an Indian woman. The name Lobo (wolf) suggests a character that is treacherous, dangerous, and wild and is given to the offspring of the union.

The title of the work also suggests that when a man who is half indigenous and half African produces a child with an indigenous woman, there is a tendency toward the increased expression of the biological characteristics that are considered African. The child, as a result, loses the benefit of the race mixing of past generations that has reduced Africanness, and ontologically regresses toward the biological characteristics of the “pure” African.

Table 1
The Relative Representation of Cultural Groups in Select Mexican Regions in 1742

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>European</th>
<th>African</th>
<th>Indigenous</th>
<th>Euro-Mestizo</th>
<th>Afro-Mestizo</th>
<th>Indigenous-Mestizo</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>9,814</td>
<td>20,131</td>
<td>1,540,256</td>
<td>391,512</td>
<td>266,196</td>
<td>249,368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>0.4</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>62.2</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Aguirre Beltrán (1989)
In this work, the indigenous woman’s skin is light brown/yellow and her hair is straight. Her nose is slightly broad but is more characteristic of a European. Her clothing is like an indigenous ceremonial costume, and she also wears a coral beaded necklace. The man’s skin is very dark brown, and his broad rimmed black hat suggests a shadowy quality in his character. He is wearing very formal colonial attire: a cape, tailored shirt, and scarf with a lace and beaded edging. In his hand he holds a cane or umbrella. His dress suggests the pretense of colonial fashion and its relation to social class and status. The man’s facial features combine characteristics commonly attributed to African and the North American indigenous groups. His nose is long (indigenous) and broad at the tip (African). Interestingly, his hair initially appears black and straight (as indigenous) but on closer inspection, is actually styled in dreadlocks (see Figure 3).

**Figure 3**
De Lobo y de India, Produce Lobo que Es Torna Atras (The offspring of a wolf and an Indian woman produces a wolf that is transformed backwards), Attributed to Juan Rodriguez Juarez (c. 1715)

Source: Courtesy of Edward Hulse, Breamore House.
The child’s skin tone is similar to or slightly darker than the father’s. Her nose is broader and her lips are fuller than her father’s. Her kinky hair escapes from beneath her European-style bonnet. She wears what appear to be a formal indigenous dress and a coral necklace. The gestures of the man and woman suggest that they are a couple; their bodies are turned toward each other. The child’s back is toward her parents. The mother gazes downward over the child’s shoulder, and the father looks forward but does not meet his partner’s gaze. The postures and arrested gazes suggest a mood of emotional distance between the family members.

The Lobo man’s colonial costume and the decreased expression of his African features suggests some racial “improvement” and potential for Europeanness in accordance with the hypotheses about racial mixing proposed by the casta theorists (Gumilla, 1791). The child’s appearance suggests a loss of the father’s gains per the casta system because the child appears more African though she is dressed in indigenous clothing. Her skin is darker and her hair is coarser than her father’s.

Another work in the casta genre is Francisco Clapera’s De Mulato y Española, Morisco (The union of a Mulatto and a Spaniard produces a Morisco), c. 1775. This painting shows a family in which the father is a Mulatto, the mother a Spaniard, and the child of the Moreno casta. The father’s skin is medium brown, his nose is broad, and his lips are full. His hair is dark brown and kinky. The mother’s skin is nearly white, and her hair is auburn and straight. Her nose is long and thin; her facial features are European. The child’s skin is paler than the father’s and his hair is medium brown and kinky. His nose is broader and his lips are fuller than his mother’s. The family is dressed in the costume of the colonial upper class (see Figure 4).

Significantly, the family appears to be in emotional turmoil. The mother is scowling as she reaches for the father’s hair and pulls on his jacket. The father is pushing her away, and his face communicates his annoyance. Several dishes of food have been spilled from the table onto the floor, and the father’s hat has also fallen on the floor. In the foreground of the painting, the child pulls on his mother’s skirt, apparently trying to prevent the intensification of the conflict between his parents.

Although the averted gazes in the work are not unusual when considered in the context of other works of this period, the gestures of the subjects of Clapera work suggest pathological relationships within the family. A review of Clapera’s paintings included in Katzew’s (2004) book Casta Painting reveals that gestures and facial expressions suggestive of family
Figure 4
De Mulato y Española, Morisco (The union of a Mulatto and a Spaniard produces a Morisco), c. 1775, Francisco Clapera

Source: Courtesy of Denver Art Museum: Collection of Frederick and Jan Mayer. Photograph copyright Denver Art Museum.
discord and violence are present particularly in the vignettes that depict racial blending that includes Mexicans of African descent. For example, the mood of the works *De Español y Negra Mulato* (From a Spaniard and a Black, a Mulatto), and *De Genizaro y Mulata, Gíbaro* (From a Genizaro and a Mulatta, a Gíbaro) is tumultuous and unpredictable. In *De Español y Negra Mulato*, a very dark-skinned woman and her White partner are shown with their small child. The child’s skin is lighter than his mother’s, and his hair has a fuzzy quality. The child appears to playfully climb up on his father’s legs, and the father grasps the child’s hands and gazes toward the child. The mother stands slightly in the background, facing the father and son. Her body is shifted slightly forward, and the gesture of her arms suggests her unease with some aspect of the situation.

In *De Genizaro y Mulata, Gíbaro*, a man, presumably the father, lies in the foreground. His skin is light in tone, his nose is broad, and his lips are relatively thin. His pants are torn and shredded, and his chest is bare. The hat that was on his head is falling off. His eyes are closed and his mouth is open, suggesting an altered state of consciousness, perhaps sleep or drunkenness. The mother’s skin is medium tone, her nose is broad, and lips are full. Her hair is coarse and is woven into a bun at the back of her head. The child’s skin is light, his nose is narrower and more pointed than his mother’s, and his lips are full. His hair is straighter than his mother’s. Both mother and child are attempting to rouse or move the father: The mother grasps and pulls on his arm and the child on his foot.

The tone of this painting suggests some dysfunction in the man, perhaps alcoholism that negatively affects the family. It appears that the nature of the problem is chronic because the facial expressions of the mother and child do not reflect shock or surprise. Rather, they seem to express empathy and stoicism toward what seems to be a familiar task, caring for the father who seems unable to manage his own behavior.

The works of the *casta* painters of colonial Mexico acknowledge and document the presence of Africans and of Europeans and indigenous groups as the roots of Mexican *mestizaje*, or cultural blending. The format of the works, depicting the many possible outcomes of miscegenation, also demonstrates a fascination with their questions about how race mixing affects physical characteristics as well as the character and psychological functioning of the resultant generations. The *casta* painters’ works provide evidence of the Africans’ presence in colonial Mexico and of their contribution to Mexican culture and history.
Postrevolutionary Mexican Muralists and Painters

It was during the postrevolutionary period in Mexico that the country realized, embraced, and touted its North American indigenous roots. Indigenous subjects also provided inspiration for visual artists working in other mediums during this period, for example in the work of Mexican muralists including Diego Rivera and David Siquieros and the painter Frida Khalo.

According to Mexican Minister of Education José Vasconcelos, who was appointed in 1921, Mexico was a “cosmic race” made of people of “mixed blood, Indian in soul and Spanish in language and civilization” (Vasconcelos, 1929). No mention was made of the cosmic race’s African or Afro-Mexican descendents who numbered 168,159 according to census records of the year 1793, 1½ centuries before Vasconcelos’s statement (Aguirre Beltrán 1989).

Few examples of persons of African descent as subjects are included in the works of painters such as Frida Khalo. In Khalo’s oeuvre, a portrait of a woman who is obviously of African descent was made in 1931 and is titled A Portrait of Eva Frederick. Another painting, The Love Embrace of the Universe, the Earth (Mexico), Diego, Me and Señor Xolotl, was made in 1949. The painting includes an image of a representation of the Mother Earth archetype, who, interestingly, is a Black woman with African facial features and dreadlocks.

Photography

Another form of recording the history of the presence of Mexicans of African descent is found in the archives of the Mexican portrait photographers. The photographers who worked in the later part of the 19th century and during the Mexican Revolution made images that recorded the faces and bodies of Mexicans that acknowledge their African biological heritage.

Romualdo García worked as a portrait photographer in Guanajuato, Guanajuato state, in central Mexico from 1887 through the 1920s. His work documents the presence of the people who lived in and traveled through Guanajuato, an important location with respect to the railroad transportation system. García’s work records the details of the physical characteristics, costume, and body language of his clients in a way that provides information about the role of social class and the presence of persons of African and indigenous descent in Guanajuato during García’s time.
For example, García’s studio portraits of his Guanajuato, Mexican, clients document their biological African characteristics, including dark skin, coarse and kinky hair texture, nose and lip shaping, and the larger bone structure that refer to African phenotypes. In one portrait, a woman wears a black satin and lace dress and a broad-rimmed hat with a plume accent. The close-fitting bodice reveals her full bosom, thick upper arms, and wide hips. Her skin tone is darker than is characteristic for persons of indigenous and European ancestry. Her nose is broad, and her lips are full (see Figure 5).

Another portrait of two women by an unidentified photographer also reveals African biological characteristics. The photograph reveals the heavier bone structure, darker skin, and broad nose and thicker lips of the woman on the right. Her hair texture is coarse and wavy and is not completely secured at her nape (see Figure 6).

Although many researchers and artists working in the area of populations of African descent have emphasized the coastal regions, including Oaxaca, Guerrero, and Veracruz states (Aguirre Beltrán, 1989; Goded, 1994; Triedo, 1999), García’s portraits provide evidence of the presence of people of African descent in central Mexico in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The images clearly depict the physical and biological characteristics of persons whose ancestry refers to Africans together with the indigenous and European (Spanish) characteristics that are frequently considered to be the components of Mexican mestizaje (ethnic and cultural creolization).

Another Mexican photographer whose work provides evidence of the African presence in Mexico is Agustín Casasola. Casasola’s images made during the Mexican Revolution comprise his most renowned body of work. Casasola photographed the participants in the revolution, including the precipitating historical events and aspects of the general cultural and political climate. Many of Casasola’s photographs are portraits of the soldiers, including individuals from all social classes and with varying biological histories, including those with African ancestors. Casasola’s work also documents the roles assumed by women, as well as by men, among the revolutionary soldiers.

Casasola’s images illustrate the faces, hair, and body structures of Mexicans whose biological origins are at least in part African. African facial and body characteristics are evident in the photograph Singers made in Mexico City in 1925. In particular, the shape of some of the women’s noses and their full lips are more characteristic of Africans than of North American indigenous or European groups. African influences are also notable in the women’s bone structures, demonstrated in the thickness of the upper arms, for example.
Other striking examples are found in the collection of Casasola’s images of women participants in the Mexican Revolution. The book *Las Soldaderas* includes images of the women soldiers together with essays by the Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska (1999). In one image made in 1915, a young woman sits, wearing a military uniform and boots. She is adorned with

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**Figure 5**

*Untitled Photograph, Romualdo García, c. 1910*

Source: With permission of the Fototeca Romualdo García, Museo Regional de Guanajuato Alhóndiga de Granaditas, INAH.

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medals and ribbons and wears a woven sombrero. Her skin is very dark, her nose is wide, and her lips are full (see Figure 7).

In another image, a woman appears to be seeing her husband off to war. He is dressed in a military uniform and wears an ammunition belt. The woman wears the *rebozo* (traditional hand-woven shawl) of an indigenous group. The man’s skin is dark, his nose is broad, and his lips are full. His facial hair is kinky and coarse, typical of persons of African descent (see Figure 8).
Figure 7
Untitled Photograph 186387, Agustín Casasola, c. 1914.

Source: With permission of SINAFO - Fototeca Nacional del INAH
Although Mexicans of African descent are not often discussed in the historical literature, the photographs made by García and Casasola attest to their presence in revolutionary and postrevolutionary Mexico. Although the creation of this historical visual record may not have been intentional, the photos assure that the presence of Mexicans whose biological origins are in Africa cannot be denied. García’s work firmly places them as active participants in the life of the city of Guanajuato. Casasola’s photographs acknowledge Afromestizo men’s and women’s contributions to such important historical events as the Mexican Revolution.

**Contemporary Mexican Photography**

Manuel Álvarez Bravo, who is often referred to the father of contemporary Mexican photography, often used indigenous Mexicans as subjects. Included in Bravo’s oeuvre are many documentary images of the lives of indigenous persons and communities, for example, an image of a visit to the cemetery in Mexico state made in 1965 (Aperture Foundation, 1997). Communities of African descent are notably absent from Bravo’s published documentary images.

In many of Bravo’s images of indigenous subjects, the indigenous woman is presented in an exotic form. For example, in the photograph “Good Reputations Lies Sleeping” (Aperture Foundation, 1997), an indigenous woman lies on a mat with her breasts exposed, surrounded by tropical and exotic vegetation. In another image, an indigenous woman wears her traditional rebozo (shawl) draped over her nude torso, exposing only one breast. This image is titled “Forbidden Fruit” (Aperture Foundation, 1997).

In a published book of 37 nudes, all of which are women (Álvarez Bravo, 2002), one of the subjects is obviously of African descent. This image was made in 1949. In the photograph, the woman sits on a traditional rebozo (shawl) and leans against a cement wall. Her body casts a shadow on the wall. Her skin is oiled and reflects the sunlight, especially her face, outer arms, and knees. Perhaps the shiny quality of her dark skin provided the inspiration for Bravo’s title, “Black Mirror.” Bravo’s title emphasizes the darkness of the woman’s skin and its exotic, mystical ability to reflect light. Or perhaps Bravo uses the mirror title as a metaphor for Mexico’s forgotten African aspect of its history. Hence, the woman’s skin reflects that aspect of history that has been buried in the collective unconscious.

Italian photographer Tina Modotti was also interested in aspects of Mexico’s non-European history and culture. Like Bravo, Modotti often
Figure 8
Untitled Photograph 6207, Agustín Casasola, c. 1915.

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photographed indigenous people and their life ways. Modotti also documented the lives of workers, the makers of traditional crafts, and the popular art movement. Among her widely published images (i.e., Saborit, 1999), images of Mexicans of African descent are obviously absent.

A survey of the work of contemporary Mexican photographers working in the past 10 to 15 years, as evidenced in the publication of the catalogs of Fotoseptiembre, the annual national photography festival, yields few examples of Mexicans of African descent as photographers’ subjects. A small number of photographers present work about persons of African descent. For example, of the promotional photographs included in the 2005 catalog of the national exhibition and festival Fotoseptiembre (2005), only 3 of the 340 images include persons who are obviously of African descent.

Among more recently created photographs that consider Mexicans of African descent as subjects is the series “Aborigines” by Ivonne Deschamps, a Mexican photographer based in Veracruz state. The images are nudes of women. If the women called “aborigines” by Deschamps are from Veracruz, they are likely to be of African and North American indigenous descent according to the history of the Afro-Atlantic slave trade in that state. The term aboriginal appropriately described the North American indigenous aspect of the women’s heritage but fails to acknowledge the contribution of the African third root.

The portraits are stylized to emphasize the women’s African biological characteristics, including their body structure, hair quality, and facial characteristics. In each image, the woman’s frizzy, textured hair is extended and attached to the background in clumps, creating raylike projections. The women appear to be very exotic and sexualized. The manipulation of the women’s hair suggests other-worldliness, as if the women originate in another planet or cosmos where their exotic nature is the norm. Deschamps’s title, “Universo” (universe) reinforces the women’s exotic nature. Even though this is conceptual work, it is highly imagined and seems to make no reference to the actual lives of the women of African and North American indigenous descent in Veracruz. In fact, the images suggest an alternative interpretation of their nature.

Mexican photographer Flor Garduno’s (2002) book Inner Light is composed of 62 images of still lifes and nude portraits of women. Garduno includes 2 images of women who are apparently of African descent. Their presentation is not conceptually or aesthetically different from the images of women who do not appear to be of African descent.

Mexican photographer Maya Goded works in coastal Guerrero. Her subjects are the people of the communities of African descent who live
there. A body of this work is published in the book *Tierra Negra* (Goded, 1994), a collection of 43 black-and-white photographs with an introductory essay by José Del Val. The vignettes depicted in Goded’s images are often highly constructed and are informed in part by the rituals and celebrations of the people of the region. They are frequently highly aesthetisized. The introduction to the book presents a historical contextualization of the population of African descent in the region. The images are presented in black and white and without captions, which makes it difficult to determine whether the work is documentary or imagined and conceptual.

For example, in one portrait, a woman poses in a lace gown. She is standing and is covered with the foam of soap, bathing in her evening gown. This image suggests the exotic and sexualized characteristics of the woman. This behavior (bathing in a lace dress) is also seemingly uncharacteristic of a woman in this region, considering the general modesty exhibited by women around issues concerning the covering of the body with clothing (Lewis, 2004). The image refers to the custom of wearing old clothes for bathing next to a cistern or well in public spaces. Bathing in a fancy dress would be inappropriate and deemed wasteful.

In another image, made in a lagoon, two people fish with basket nets in the background. In the foreground, a fully clothed woman peers through the vegetation. She is dressed in a skirt and blouse and is completely wet. She is lying on her stomach, and she appears to be crawling toward the fishermen, through the swamp. Her skirt sticks to her body, clearly outlining her buttocks. Her hair is wild and uncombed. The image suggests a sexualized, animal-like aspect of the woman. She emerges from the swamp in the manner of a wild animal, such as a crocodile. In a region where people have few material resources, the act of crawling through the water wearing clothes that are in good condition and useful for daily work and activities would also be likely to be considered wasteful.

In a third image from the same series, an older Black woman stands in a white wedding gown with a veil. She takes a long drag and blows smoke from a cigarette. The image seems to juxtapose what the wedding gown symbolically represents—youth, purity, and virginity—with the woman who actually wears it. The woman’s age and the gesture of smoking the cigarette suggest that she is not pure or virginal. The image reads, “what the bridal gown represents, this old, black woman cannot be.” The image is actually taken out of context. It is an image of a prewedding ritual, the *mojigangas*. During the ritual, the two prospective mothers-in-law roast the couple before the marriage by masquerading as the bride and groom themselves. In Goded’s image, a mother has dressed as her daughter, the bride, as part of the ritual.
Although many of Goded’s images depict Costeños engaged in their normal activities, including work, healing rituals, and significant events such as funerals, the lack of a distinction between images that are more documentary and images that are constructed and imagined is problematic. The result is at times the suggestion of exotic, highly sexualized qualities and characteristics of the women of African descent from the region.

In her critique of Goded’s images, anthropologist Laura Lewis (2004) notes that Goded’s use of black-and-white photos suggests a photojournalistic authenticity, whereas the lack of captions provides no opportunity for contextualization. The lack of captions or text with the photos on the pages does not allow the reader to make the distinction between women who were homemakers and women who were prostitutes. According to Lewis, images of women drinking alcohol and demonstrating a lack of modesty in dress and their placement in constructed vignettes in relation to nature present an eroticized and overtly exotic representation of the residents of the town of San Nicolas.

A different visual perspective on Mexicans of African descent is provided by Nicolas Triedo. His images made in communities of La Costa Chica are documentary in character. The work was presented in an exhibition, “Ébano,” in the United States in 1999 and an accompanying book was published. Triedo’s work includes portraits in natural settings against the backdrop of his subjects’ indoor and outdoor living spaces. Some of the portraits are made in very close range, emphasizing the physical characteristics of facial structure and hair texture. Other images place Triedo’s subjects with objects that are related to daily activities and work.


**Discussion**

This consideration of examples of Mexican visual art suggests that artists’ use of Mexicans of African descent as the subject of their work acknowledges an African historical presence in Mexico from colonial times through the present. Muralists such as Chávez Morado and photographers like Casasola have depicted historical events that demonstrate the presence and active participation of Mexicans of African descent in important historical events, beginning
at the time of their enslavement through the Mexican Revolution and continuing to the present time. Contemporary painters like Muñoz, as well as Rodríguez and other casta painters, depicted their fantasies about relationships between Europeans, North American indigenous groups, and Africans, including the outcome of racial mixing.

The works of contemporary photographers also acknowledge the continued presence of Mexicans of African descent in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Maya Goded’s, Nicolas Triedo’s, and Manuel González de la Parra’s photographs made in communities of African descent along La Costa Chica in the states of Oaxaca and Guerrero, as well as in Veracruz state, attest to their sustained presence.

From Jung’s perspective, that which has been repressed (i.e., Mexicans’ collective memory of the history of the African presence) ultimately finds a vehicle for expression. In this case, the subject of the contribution of Mexico’s African third root, which seems not to be retrievable by many contemporary educated Mexicans, has historically found a means of expression in the realm of visual art.

Certain characteristics of the works may provide information about the prevailing views concerning Mexicans of African descent over time. The works of the casta painters suggests unease about the relationships between Africans and indigenous North American and European groups’ related fears about race mixing. The emotional tone of works like De Genizaro y Mulata, Gíbaro by Clapera suggest a belief in a potential pathological aspect of family dynamics when families included African men. Anxiety about amorous and sexual relationships between Black men and other groups that have been historically present in Mexico and the resultant race mixing is also evident in the work of painters like Vallalprado Muñoz.

The works of some contemporary photographers also suggest a curiosity about the nature of Mexicans of African descent. Work by Ivonne Deschamps and Maya Goded, for example, seem to attribute mystical and exotic qualities to the population and present women as oversexualized.

Perhaps this general unease and anxiety about the mixing of races and the ultimate racial composition of Mexican mestizaje demonstrated in the visual art works has contributed to the repression of the memory of the African presence and participation in Mexican history. This persistent angst, passed from one generation to the next as a component of the collective unconscious, may explain contemporary Mexican culture’s failure to fully acknowledge the completeness of Africa’s participation in Mexico’s history as an essential ingredient in the formulation of Mexican cultural identity, Mexican mestizaje.
References


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