

Tinker Field Report- Nicole-Marie Cotton

On the Cusp of Recognition: The Afro-Mexican Racial Moment in Mexico City

This year marks the 100-year Anniversary of the Mexican Constitution. It also marked 10 years since I first came to Mexico City as an exchange student at UNAM. In what is called “defense of the constitution”, the local of Mexico City has added recognition and protection of vulnerable population to the Federal District which include Afro-descendants, children, elderly, disabled, and LGBT individuals. As a researcher who studies on sustainable development in Afro-Mexican communities in Oaxaca, I was particularly curious to return to Mexico City to see how the discussion around race has changed and how government agencies are promoting visibility and legal recognition in the nation’s capital.

If you are one of the few who are familiar with the historical African presence in Mexico, you probably know it as the “Third Root”. Three heritages are given credit in building the nation: European, indigenous and African. Most people associate blackness in Mexico with Veracruz as it was an important slave port in Mexico during the colonial period. Veracruz, part of the transatlantic slave trade, has historic and contemporary connections to Caribbean immigrants. The Afro-Mexicans on the Atlantic Coast are thought of as children of Cuban and other immigrants. More recent attention has been given to Afro-Mexicans on the Pacific Coast of Oaxaca and Guerrero (called the Costa Chica) since the region is the birthplace of the current civil rights movement for official recognition and collective rights. Mexico City is an important case study because at one point in the colonial period, Mexico City had more African descendants than Europeans and the second president of Mexico, Vicente Guerrero, was half black.

Despite the fact that African-descendants were a significant part of the population who made significant contributions to language, gastronomy and held the highest political office, this history is not taught in Mexican text books and remains unknown to the majority of the population. Agua de Jamaica, a popular Mexican drink was a product of enslaved Africans who brought over the Hibiscus plant from

Africa. Menudo also has African roots, so does Mariachi. However, credit has not been given to the Africans who contributed to the iconic products that make up the National Identity.

This trip to Mexico came on the heels of the deportation of 600 Haitian immigrants from Baja, Mexico to Brazil. This was denounced by Wilner Metelus, a Haitian naturalized citizen and founder and President of the Ciudadano de defense de los Naturalizados y Afromexicanos. Metelus has been vocal about discrimination against afro-descendants in Mexico and makes use of media to raise awareness about racist acts government officials do against blacks in Mexico. He condemned the government's handling of the murder of Malcom X's grandson, Malcom Shabazz, which occurred in Mexico City as well as the racist statements former Diputado of Chiapas, Ariel Gomez Leon made about Haitians. Afro-Mexicans who are not immigrants- who trace their ancestry to colonial periods (and some who claim pre-Colombian African decent) are relatively absent from Metalus' organization and work. It appears they distance themselves due to differences on approach, but most importantly because they do not want to be mistaken for immigrants. That is a legitimate concern.

I attended the Mexico City Commission of Human Rights forum where they announced the additions to the constitution. One advocate explained that Afro-Mexicans needed protection because they are often discriminated against in hospitals-where they are denied treatment, not given due legal resources, and are harassed by authorities on the streets because they are suspected of being undocumented immigrants from other countries with no right to government resources. One of the critiques given regarding the inclusion of Afro-descendants in the constitution was the use of the word afro-descendants-(which include immigrants) rather than the term "Afro-Mexican" and a clear acknowledgement of their historical presence and nation-building.

While conducting research I have been surprised at some of the comments I have received when looking for material about Afro-Mexicans. When I went to UNAM, the National Autonomous

University of Mexico, to find publications on the topic, I was told by the staff member who sold faculty books that I would not find much since researchers tend to focus on comparisons on blackness in the Americas on a whole rather than specifically on Mexico. When asked why, he said he was not sure, there was not very much interest and the people who come to buy books tended to be visitors from other countries like me. On a previous trip to Mexico, a historian and I went to the National Archives and asked the archivist where we could find information on Afro-Mexicans during the early colonial period. He insisted we were in the wrong building. We needed to go to the agency that kept records of passports. My friend and I looked at each other confused and explained to him that we were looking for documents associated with the colonial presence. The archivist was shocked. He had no idea that Afro-Mexicans were around since the conquest.

One of my first stops on this trip was the Museum of Tolerance and Memory. I knew government organizations such as the Council to Prevent Discrimination (CONAPRED) had used the space in some of its multi-cultural training events. I found the museum to be somewhat contrary to its name. I expected to see a space dedicated to multi-cultural Mexico, and perhaps exhibits on social movements since outside was a bust of Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King among other civil rights leaders. However, the exhibits were dedicated to the major genocides of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century with graphic images of bodies piled high and methods of execution. The explanation given to tourists is that the founders of the museum believed that in order to promote tolerance, one has to understand what intolerance can do. The dark exhibits had glimmers of hope with passports displayed of refugees who fled to Mexico during and after acts of genocide.

The question of how tolerance, multiculturalism or recognition has become to associated with what is foreign rather than what is native is something that I am still grappling to understand. How I am privileged in people's response to me makes no sense. As an African descendant, I cannot say that I have experienced discrimination in Mexico and as I speak with African-American expats here in Mexico City

they express the same sentiment. Conversely, Afro-Mexicans who travel to the city often say they do along with Haitians. That they have to prove their Mexicanness- their citizenship. I caught up with an old friend I met during my first trip to Mexico 10 years ago who is now a professor at UNAM. We both remembered an incident that happened on my birthday at a popular night club in Polanco. The bouncer pointed to the group of exchange students and identified who could gain entrance to the club and who would be out. My friend asked, "Did your Californian friends ever come back to Mexico? It must have been hard coming to reconnect with your roots and being rejected for looking... well Mexican." "No, not really", I replied. "I think only a few have come back" I told him that night has stood out to be because I was expected to be rejected, but I was not. I was let in and surprised that my friends were being discriminated in an obvious way. My friend responded, " Nicole, you have to understand in Mexico there is a fascination with all that is foreign to the point where people reject themselves." Perhaps that explains it. Would an Afro-Mexican be rejected at this nightclub or accepted? Is my blackness is alright, but the blackness within uncomfortable? Maybe it is my origin in the U.S. puts people at ease that I come with my own resources so I am not a threat to theirs. There are no obvious answers in this short research period. How Mexico is discussing African roots and recognizing it's African descendant citizens is something scholars dedicate their lives to understand.