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A Missed Opportunity: Post-Revolutionary Mexican Murals and Incomplete Historical Narratives

Jesus Gandara Ortega

University at Albany, State University of New York, jgandaraortega@albany.edu

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A Missed Opportunity:
Post-Revolutionary Mexican Murals and Incomplete Historical Narratives

Jesus Gandara Ortega
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Abstract

This research project investigates the sociopolitical factors that contributed to the lack of Afro-Mexican representation in post-revolutionary murals and how the erasure of Afro-Mexicans in government-commissioned propaganda has affected Afro-descendant communities today in Mexico. The post-revolutionary struggles for power to unite the country have all but erased the representation of Afro-descendants in murals, historical records, and among its citizens. The absence of Afro-descendants in post-revolutionary murals contributes to continued stigma and discrimination against Afro-descendants in Mexico.

Keywords:

Afro-descendants; Mexico; post-revolution; muralism; cultural recognition; racial invisibility; slavery.

I. Enslavement, Racial Politics, and Colonial Power in New Spain

It was in 1493 when the first black man arrived to the Americas in Christopher Columbus' second expedition as a free person (Palmer 1942, 7). Eight years later, in 1501, slavery was initially introduced to the New World by Spain and Portugal as a labor force to "mine minerals... and begin the production of commercial crops to be sold in the European markets" (Eltis, Bradley; Cartledge 2011, 331).. Licenses to transport slaves and the slaves themselves were heavily regulated by the Spanish Crown. The transportation of Moor slaves to New Spain, present-day Mexico, was prohibited in 1543 because they were "intractable and rebellious" (120). There was also a strong seal to keep any non-Christian influences, such as the Islamic influences from Moor slaves, away from newly converted Christians in New Spain. It is not clear when the first slaves arrived at Mexico, but records of transport licenses start in 1578 (16) with an estimated 151,618 slaves in Mexico by 1646 (Bennet 2003, 23). Records also indicate that most slaves transported to New Spain were from West and Central Africa (Palmer, 21). From 1580 to 1650, demand for slaves grew as the European diseases and severe labor

environments decreased the indigenous population. . After such period, the slave population and its trade steadily declined (3) until emancipation in 1829. Not all Afro descendants in America were slaves, people like Juan Garrillo was born in West Africa, served as a slave, became free and in 1519 was part of the Herman Cortes expeditions to conquer Tenochtitlan. Garrillo was not the only African to participate in the Mexican conquest. Other conquistadores such as Nuño de Guzman also used armed Black auxiliaries during his conquest expeditions and to keep to indigenous population subdued (Restall 2000, 181). People like Garrillo and other freed black slaves or “mulattos”, a mixed person of a Black parent and a Caucasian parent, had the right to receive the benefits of living as a freeperson. Some of these rights included: private property rights, political representation, job opportunities, and the ability to travel or to change residence at will. But in reality, “freedmen [in New Spain] were essentially marginal men who existed in a hostile environment” (Palmer 1942, 182). Free Africans and mulattos had to always carry a copy of their *carta de libertad* (letter of liberty) to avoid being confused with a *cimarrón*, a runaway slave. In 1570, the Spanish became concerned of slave rebellions after being outnumbered by enslaved, mestizo, and indigenous populations and by 1646, the Spanish population was outnumbered by all groups, including mulattos. Data from *The History of Mexico From Pre-Conquest to Present* by Philip L. Russell (2010) shows the different populations in 1646; 1,269,607 indigenous, 277,610 Mestizos, 35,089 Blacks, 116,529 Mulattos and 13,780 Europeans. In 1612, a law for funeral practices was placed to only allow four black man and four black women within a single funeral (180). Spanish law forbade Black men to carry weapons and they had to reside under “Spanish supervision” (Bennet 2003, 52). In the 1570s, no black freeman could change residency without a license (Palmer 1942, 183). In addition to this, authorities were not obligated to provide any educational opportunities for people of color. Even

so, some free Africans or mulattos were able to enter a limited number of guilds, more predominately as glovemakers, press operators, hat makers, needle makers, candlemakers and leather dressers (180).

The role of the Catholic Church in the colonies was to provide for the spiritual needs of colonists and to convert indigenous and enslaved populations. They were also *the* authority who granted slaves any rights, served as judges. and as home or workplace inspectors when necessary. From 1571 to 1820, during the Spanish Inquisition in Mexico, the Church would prosecute any act or verbal offense against God and the Catholic doctrine by slaves, as blasphemy. The newly converted slaves could not be prosecuted for heresy , which is a belief or an opinion contrary to the Church, because it would require them to fully understand the Christian faith, therefore, blasphemy was the only crime they could be charged with and most common crime for Afro-Mexicans during the Inquisition (Villa-Flores 2002, 442). The punishments for blasphemy varied from 50 to 200 slashes, public gaging and humiliation, or put in chains for prolonged periods of time. Even when punishments for blasphemy were severe, many slaves used blasphemy to escape death or mistreatment from their masters by denouncing God when being beaten. Blasphemy trials were long and could place slaves in prison at the masters' expense (Villa-Flores, 2002). In a way, slaves were able to fight their masters by appealing to the Church for a lesser punishment or by petitioning to be transferred to a master who would not subject them to the same abuse that made them loose control and denounce God. This time also brought home or workplace inspections; slave masters who were found to force their slaves to sleep together, work on holy days or prevent them from fulfilling their religious obligations, would be fined. There were other laws such as the *Siete Partidas*, created in 1263, which “defined the nature of the relationship between masters and slaves” (Palmer 1942, 85).

These laws made the separation of enslaved married couples and the murder or mutilation of slaves illegal, unless ordered by a judge (86). These laws provided a model for the colonist, but it was difficult for New Spain to recognize this system. Unlike Spain, where most men were free men, the Mexican colony needed to introduce strict measures to ensure the safety of the colonists, to continue enslaving its Black subjects, and to avoid any opportunity for slave rebellion. The Spanish Crown, therefore, believed that violence and oppression were a necessity to pacify and regulate the enslaved African population in Mexico to maintain their legitimacy as a powerful colonial presence in the Americas.

By 1646, Mexico had a mulatto population of 116,529 and an African slave population of 35,089, but by 1793 the mulatto population had tripled to 369,790 while the African population had decreased to 6,100. During the Mexican War of Independence in 1810, also known as the “race or class war” (Ted Vincent, 272), Afro-descendants were one of the main forces in the fight against the Spanish Crown. Within the leadership, there were eight Afro-descendant leaders who led the nation towards independence. Leaders such as General Vicente Guerrero, who later became the second president of Mexico and the first Afro-descendant president in the Americas, and General José María Morelos were among the most influential leaders of the movement. By the end of the Mexican War of Independence in 1821, the nation’s diversity and class struggles led to regulations that aimed to overlook race and unite the country. Congress passed Law #303, “which prohibited public officials from speaking disparagingly of any citizen’s ethnic background”, and law #313 prohibited the use of race in any government document or in church records of baptism, marriage, and death” (272), but most importantly, no racial counts were made during the census. It is not clear if these laws united Mexico, but they did contribute to the historical erasure of Mexican blackness. It is important to mention that even when the Mexican

War of Independence ended in 1821, slavery was not nationally abolished until 1829. In 1821, Article 12 of the *Plan de Iguala*, served as a temporary constitution and states that “all the inhabitants of the Mexican Empire, without any other distinction besides merit and virtue, are suitable citizens to apply for any employment” (citation needed). Even when Article 12 states that all inhabitants living in Mexico were considered *citizens*, enslaved persons were still seen as *private property* and could *not* benefit from Article 12. Agustín de Iturbide, the first emperor of the Mexican Empire, was respectful of the Church’s and individual’s private property and avoided any confrontations in the topic of slavery. In 1824, when Mexico became a Republic, the constitution did not explicitly mention the abolishment of slavery, but 19 individual states took the initiative to include it into their state constitutions (Olveda 2012). Later, in 1825, the first president of Mexico, Guadalupe Victoria, granted the freedom to all the slaves who could be bought by the Federal Government and any other slaves whose master allowed their freedom, unfortunately, the federal fund was only able to buy the freedom of twelve slaves (2012). In addition to this, in 1826, Victoria prohibited the import or export of slaves in Mexico. Lastly, in 1829, Vicente Guerrero, the second president of Mexico and the first Afro-descendant president in the Americas, finally abolished slavery throughout Mexico.

II. African Influence in Mexico

Africans and Afro-descendants did not remain in isolated communities. This is evident by the growing mulatto population of 2,435 in 1570 to 369,790 in 1793 and in the African influences in today’s Mexican cuisine. One of the biggest African contributions to Mexico is rice. Contrary to popular belief, rice was not introduced to Mexico by the Philippines, rather, evidence shows that it was introduced as slave food in 1522 (Hernandez 2015, 100). The first

Asian cargo arrived to Mexico in 1573 (107), while there is evidence of sacks of rice being transported and well adapted rice plots in Mexico since 1556 (100). Rice was a staple food in West Africa and it was most likely brought by Portuguese slave ships to feed cargo (103). Rice was also not part of the Spain's heritage cuisine. We know this because rice was first introduced in Spain by the Moors, but Spanish "considered rice a pagan cereal unfit for Christian consumption until the 19th century" (Hernandez 2015, 103). Spanish colonists did not consume rice, but for the West African slaves, it remained a staple to their diet that has indelibly influenced Mexican cuisine as we know it today.

Another misconception about Afro-descendants in Mexico is the misinterpretation of the term "*chino*" in José Antonio de Villaseñor y Sanchez's report to the Spanish Crown. In his report, he mentions that Acapulco only had "four hundred families of *chinos*, mulattos and Blacks" (109). However, José Antonio de Villaseñor y Sanchez's did not mean "*chino*" meaning "Chinese," rather, its use was intended as an abbreviation for *cochino* (dirty) referring to the "tainted" mixed Afro-descendants living in Acapulco (109) and not the Chinese community who arrived to Acapulco later.

Another African contribution to Mexican cuisine is found in three traditional drinks, commonly referred to as *agua frescas*. The first, *agua de Jamaica* (hibiscus tea), derives its name from the Black republic of Jamaica, however, the *Cambridge World History of Food* report shows that Jamaica is "possibly a native of West Africa (it is a close relative of okra)" (1844). The second traditional *agua fresca* is *agua de Tamarindo*, which "according to the California Rare Fruit Growers, 'The tamarind is a native to Africa and grows wild throughout the Sudan [region]. It was introduced to India so long ago, it has been reported as indigenous there also...today it is widely grown in Mexico'" (115). There is also the connection when looking at

the word “N’ dakar” in Wolof, a language spoken in Senegal, Mali and Gambia today, which means “tamarind tree.” Today, both Mexico and West Africa still use tamarind in popular beverages (115). Lastly, the third traditional Mexican *agua fresca* is *horchata de arroz* (*agua de horchata* or simply *horchata*), a traditional milky beverage made from rice, water, cinnamon, milk, sugar, and vanilla. It is important to mention that there was no information in the preparation of *horchata* as an African recipe, only that rice preparation comes from West African influences. It is also important to mention that Asian rice did gain influence in the eighteenth century over African rice due to its sturdiness inside the mill (101). These examples are not the only African influences in Mexican cuisine, there are striking similarities in food preparation; the best example is the similarity between *Jollof rice* from West Africa and *Arroz a la Mexicana* or *Arroz a la tumbada*.¹

III. Afro-Descendants and The Mexican Revolution

One of the most transformative periods of Mexico were the revolutionary years and their aftermath. The Mexican Revolution started in 1910. The main tenants of the revolution centered on ending thirty-five years of the Porfirio Díaz’s dictatorship (1876 - 1911) known as the *Porfiriato*, ending all future reelections of despotic rule, land reform and redistribution with the creation of communal *ejido* lands in indigenous communities, and liberty of assembly and press. Race was not a direct subject of the revolutionary struggle, however, the fight against the *Porfiriato* was also a fight against his advisors, *Los Científicos*, who considered indigenous

¹ Upon looking at other types of African influences in Mexico, we find folklore dances such as *El Son de Artesa* or *la danza de los demonios* dance during *Día de los Muertos* (the Day of the Dead). Or music, “afro-Mexican jarocho sound, made famous by Ritchie Valens’ 1958 hit cover of *La Bamba*, a traditional jarocho tune” (Afropop Worldwide 2017).

communities as a “backward race” (Raat, 415). In 1920, after most of the turmoil of revolution had ended, the Minister of Education, Jose Vasconcelos, and President Alvaro Obregon, started a nationwide movement to create a “state-run culture:”

Vasconcelos proposed a cultural program in which the artist-intellectuals was a ‘redeemer’ and ‘prophet.’ Art and knowledge must serve to improve the condition of the people,’ Vasconcelos exhorted, urging all Mexican intellectuals to ‘leave their ivory towers and seal a pact of alliance with the Revolution.’ The cultural messianism of Vasconcelos’ program was based on a concept of *mestizaje*, in which European culture would rescue the Indian from his ‘underdeveloped ‘ ways. Vasconcelos hired the muralist to paint this ideology, and his project for spiritual renewal through high culture affected mural production” (Anreus, et. Al. 2012, 15).

Vasconcelos wrote about how he wanted to create a new civilization: Universópolis in Mexico, also known as the La Raza Cósmica (the cosmic race). Vasconcelos believed in whitening Mexico’s inherit blackness, a process that only considered the “white dominant population [originating from Spain] and the defeated American population” (Beltran, 9), but made no consideration to include the black communities (9). This idea, that half a century of ethnic and racial mixing is strictly indigenous and European completely ignores the biological and ethnic contributions made by Africans and their descendants (Martinez, 2). Vasconcelos’ efforts to create a state-run culture were a continuation of the African invisibility created in Spanish chronicles of the colonial period.

Vasconcelos used several sociopolitical tactics to educate and unite Mexico under his vision of a newly created, fully *mestizo* world. He launched an education campaign with missionary teachers traveling into the rural areas, he also used the radio, cinematography, literature, and art to propagate his message. In 1920, the majority of Mexicans spoke Spanish as a second language. While literacy rates increased, Mexicans failed to notice that Vasconcelos education program was simply “imposing the European Spanish language upon all” (Hernandez

2004, 6). Vasconcelos was homogenizing Mexico to take control over it (10). Both Vasconcelos and President Obregon intended to direct Mexico through a state-run culture and cultural homogenization to strengthen the state's power and its legitimacy. Cultural homogenization aims to standardize culture and overlap it with the state. It is "part of the process of state-building, where the goal has often been to forge cohesive, unified communities of citizens under governmental control" (Conversi 2010).

Another effort to whiten Mexico's demographic population is documented in the nation's immigrations laws. Black immigration was restricted between 1926 and 1931; "it was mandatory to improve the race through *mestizaje* and this could not be achieved by yoking Mexicans with individuals from insignificant lineage" (Hernandez 2004, 21). Vasconcelos was able to turn years of revolutionary struggle into an opportunity to expand his racist ideals of creating a "cosmic race", influencing literature, art and history into a culture that rescinds its racial diversity in favor for lighter phenotypes.

Part IV. Post-Revolutionary Murals

Murals were part of Vasconcelos's political agenda to create a state-sponsored idealization of Mexican culture. Not all murals were well received, but in general, Mexicans embraced Vasconcelos ideas, they were "tired of divisionism and fighting, people embraced at face value Vasconcelos' program of one 'Latin-America' Mexico for all" (Hernandez 2004, 6). The first revolutionary murals commissioned by Vasconcelos were painted at the National Preparatory School from 1922 to 1923. The mural *Maternity* by Jose Clemente Orozco and *Creation* by Diego Rivera, both made no reference to the revolution and its class violence, "in order to give art a redemptive regenerative role in post-revolutionary Mexico" (Anreus,

Folgarait, Greeley 2012, 17). Other murals such as Diego Rivera's *Distribution of the Land* (1923-1924) celebrated the fictional accomplishment of land redistribution in rural Mexico. In reality, land redistribution had become a failed revolutionary promise that would prioritize the redistribution of well-organized indigenous groups, such as the Zapatistas, but was non-existent in northern states (Reyes, 21). Other murals, such as Diego Alfaro Siqueiros' *Burial of a Worker* (1923- 1924) portrayed the Mexican proletariat class. By the end of 1923, there was a push by muralists to distance themselves from Vasconcelos idealism and they began to paint "contemporary political events rather than allegories, past histories, or scenes from folklore...through an iconography of workers, peasants, and Indians, the muralist shifted their rhetoric, taking a position to the left of Vasconcelos but remaining within the limits of state-sponsored populism" (Anreus, Folgarait, Greeley 2012, 19). In July of 1924, Vasconcelos was forced into exile and President Obregon ceased the post-revolutionary muralist movement.

Other murals such as *The People in Arms* (1957–1965) by Siqueiros shows united revolutionary figures, Jose Clemente Orozco's *Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla* (1936-1939) shows heroes and struggles of the independence movement, Diego Rivera's *Dream of a Sunday Afternoon* (1947) shows historic figures, regular Mexican citizens and other global influences, and Rivera's *Historia de Mexico* (1929 -1935) shows the history of Mexico since colonial times. Each of these murals represent Mexico's wars, struggles, and culture. All these murals were made to unite and educate Mexicans towards the new multiracial and pluri-ethnic world and to establish and strengthen Mexican identity and its history. However, in each mural, there are no references, no imagery, no symbols of Mexico's "third root" as part of the nation's history and culture. This invisibility is important to understand because the use of art reflects and shapes culture (Banks, 2006), it is an important and powerful tool to communicate ideas and history.

The Mexican government has used art for their propagandistic agenda since the 16th century (207). Post-revolutionary murals were made to legitimize the new authoritarian government (Coffey 2012) and create a controllable state-run culture. They used notions of *mestizaje* as a formula to unite the nation, bleach out blackness, but also to solve the “indigenous problem” of uninterested indigenous communities that had historically not taken part in the “modernization” of Mexico (Velazquez and Iturralde 2012, 93). Blackness was not only oppressed by historical European notions of whiteness, but they were made invisible-- and therefore nonessential-- in the sociopolitical and cultural creation of post-revolutionary Mexico.

V. Conclusions

The invisibility of Afro-descendants in post-revolutionary murals is one of the symptoms of the historical erasure of *Afro-Latinidad* among demographics and culture in Mexico. Such symptoms have contributed to the creation of a fragmented Mexican identity that fails to acknowledge important African influences within Mexican history and its sociocultural fabric. In 1978, the 1,300 pages of the encyclopedia *Historia de Mexico*, edited by Savant and coordinated by Miguel León Portilla, mentions the word “negro” only once. Such a blatant omission is intentional and racially rooted (Beltrán 2005, 355), to write an encyclopedia about the history of Mexico without crediting all African ethnic and racial mixing is to write an incomplete history of Mexico. A Mexico that negates its Blackness is not a real Mexico. The murals have become a historical representation of the past and they form part of today’s Mexican identity. Post-revolutionary murals exemplified an important opportunity to exalt not only the indigenous roots, but also African heritage and forced enslavement that was so crucial to creating Mexico’s ultimate economic and political power. Unfortunately, this lost opportunity has contributed to

discriminatory consequences faced by Afro-descendants today. A magazine by Arlene Gregorius (2016) from Mexico BBC news, reported the necessity for some afro-descendants to carry their passport, know the names of governors from different states, and sing the National anthem when requested by the police, to avoid being detained or deported by authorities who believe they are illegal immigrants. They are not recognized as Mexicans, after almost two hundred years of freedom and almost five hundred years of living in Mexico. The lack of Afro-Mexican imagery in post-revolutionary murals and political propaganda of the time has made an indelible impact on Mexico today, an impact that has contributed to the continued discrimination in Mexico against its own citizens.