ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: AFRO-MEXICAN FOLKTALES AND POETRY IN MEXICO AND THE UNITED STATES

Nancy Berenice Tenorio Carrillo,
Doctor of Philosophy, 2024

Dissertation directed by: Emeritus Professor, Dr. Merle Collins,
English Department
Professor, Dr. Ryan Long,
School of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures

The aim of my dissertation is to challenge what I call *mestizo* normativity. In creating and coining the term *mestizo* normativity, I borrow from Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant's work on queer theory. In their work "Sex in Public" (1998), Warner and Berlant note that heterosexuality only appears to be normal because of public structures that regulate the sex binary. In their work they note that everything in public life is done with the aim of normalizing the male/female binary. This binary affects all aspects of daily life and can be seen, for example, in the male/female designations in public bathrooms and male/female categories in sports.
I use the term *mestizo* normativity to interrogate how Afro-Mexican works of poetry, folklore, ballads, and stories disrupt accepted definitions of Blackness and Latinidad in the Americas. As Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores note, in *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* (2010), "we are accustomed to thinking of "Afro" and "Latin@" as distinct from each other and mutually exclusive: one is either Black or Latin@." In essence, those who do not fall neatly along the Black/Latino binary are asked to choose between their identities. They can be either Latino or Black but not both. In a similar fashion, queers and bisexuals are made to choose between the

heterosexual/homosexual binary; they can be heterosexuals or homosexuals but not both. With these definitions in mind, I read Afro-Mexican literature as queer literature. Afro-Mexicans do not fit neatly along the Afro/Latino binary; they are both, and in that two-ness lies their queerness.

My dissertation adds to the field of Afro-Mexican studies by positing that Afro-Mexican literature shares similarities with African traditions, history, and culture. As Nicole von Germeten has pointed out in her work "Juan Roque's Donation" in *Afro-Latino Voices* (2009), the African diaspora in Mexico is as much a part of Mexican history as Spanish history. Throughout the colonial period, Spaniards always constituted a small minority in New Spain and were overwhelmingly outnumbered by Africans throughout the colonial period. African culture, like Spanish culture, is also part of Mexico.

In order to prove my thesis of *mestizo* normativity, I have organized my dissertation into four chapters. In chapter one I argue that Afro-Mexican folktales share similarities with West and Central African storytelling practices. In my analysis, I note that Afro-Mexican tales share similarities with trickster rabbit tales from the Bantu people in Central Africa and Hausa people in West Africa. And moreover, I note that these tales fall into the *tatsuniya* genre of storytelling found among the Hausa people of West and Central Africa. This genre of tales is known as a subversive category of tales, for it includes tales of small animals taking down larger animals. I argue that these tales are how Afro-Mexicans remember their African heritage. As is discussed in my first chapter, the first scholars to analyze Afro-Mexican folktales moved away from comparing them to West and Central African folklore because they understood all Mexican literature to stem from Mexico's Amerindian and Spanish roots. That is, their readings upheld *mestizo* normativity.

In my second chapter, I argue that the ballad tradition in the Costa Chica shares similarities with West African storytelling traditions. Moreover, I argue that through ballads, *versos*, and maroon poetry, Afro-Mexicans disrupt the notion of a *mestizo* Mexico. That is, they question the single story that has been told about Mexico and create a multifaceted and culturally complex site that they recognize as home. To drive this point home, I compare Afro-Mexican *corridos* to *calypsos* and argue for readings that include Afrodiasporic strategies of resistance when dealing with Afrodesendant peoples.

In chapter three, I read Afro-Mexican works written by writers in the U.S. diaspora. I examine how these writers' perceptions of race are formed in the U.S.

Lastly, I examine how contemporary writers such as Aleida Violeta Vázquez Cisneros, Abel Emigdio Baños Delgado, and Filemón Silva Sandoval use social media to promote their written works and challenge readings that depict Mexico as a Black free space.

AFRO-MEXICAN FOLKTALES AND POETRY IN MEXICO AND THE UNITED STATES

by

Nancy Berenice Tenorio Carrillo

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
2024

Advisory Committee:
Professors Merle Collins and Ryan Long, Co-Chairs
Dr. Ralph Bauer
Dr. Nancy Mirabal
Dr. José Navarro

Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the unwavering support of my co-advisors Dr. Merle Collins and Dr. Ryan Long and my mentors Dr. José Navarro and Dr. Dustin Stegner at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, and of course, Dr. Ralph Bauer and Dr. Nancy Mirabal at the University of Maryland, College Park. The journey has been long but worthwhile. Thank you for sticking by my side. You have all set the bar so high. I can only hope to be half the educators you all are.

Moreover I would like to thank my wonderful friends Dominique Young and Fatima Taha. I have learned so much from you both and you have made my graduate education such a wonderful experience.

I would also like to thank Dr. Will Mosley and Dr. Neel Ahuja at the Harriet Tubman Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. I have learned so much as your teaching assistant, and my theory of *mestizo* normativity would not have been possible without the intersectional readings that you both bring to the classroom.

Last but not least, I want to extend a big thank you to my wonderful husband Stefan Felix Spack. Thank you for being so encouraging and for traveling with me to Mexico and reminding me to have fun during my dissertation journey.

Speaking of fun, thank you Dr. Isabella Alcañiz and Eric Tomalá, at the Latin American and Caribbean Studies Center. Your POP-UP research grants went a long way in Mexico and made my research and travels possible.

Moreover, I could not properly close this chapter without thanking the wonderful librarians, who drive the heart of academic research. Dr. Linda Macri, the director of the

Graduate School Writing Center at the University of Maryland, College Park, has been an invaluable source of support, guidance, and wisdom during my dissertation journey. And the staff at the university libraries of Bern, Basel, and Zurich, Switzerland have continuously welcomed me with open arms and gone above and beyond to find the texts I have needed for my research while living abroad.

Table of Contents

Table of Figures

Introduction: Afro-Mexican Folktales and Poetry in Mexico and the United States

> I remember walking around on my first day in Guadalajara, watching the people going to work, rolling up tortillas in the marketplace, smoking, laughing. I remember first feeling slight surprise. And then, I was overwhelmed with shame. I realized that I had been so immersed in the media coverage of Mexicans that they had become one thing in my mind, the abject immigrant. I had bought into the single story of Mexicans and I could not have been more ashamed of myself. So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.
>
> —Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie from "The Danger of a Single Story"

In "The Danger of a Single Story" presented at TED Global in July 2009, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie traces her journey as a young writer in Lagos, Nigeria and the United States. In her talk, she narrates how she viewed rural villages in Nigeria, where the help was usually from, as unable to "actually make something" (3:31). As she noted, she had a single story about her family's house boy Fide. As she states, "all [she] had heard about them was how poor they were, so that it had become impossible for [her] to see them as anything else but poor" (3:31). Later, in her talk, she notes how she fell victim to the trope of a single story again. When she visited Guadalajara, Mexico, she was shocked to see that Mexicans had complex, rich, and fulfilling lives that did not revolve around the U.S./Mexican border. As she notes, she "bought into a single story of Mexicans" (8:42).

I begin with Adichie's story to illustrate the power of stories. As Adichie notes, before she even traveled to Mexico, she already had a story about Mexicans and expected them to live a certain way and act a certain way. That is she had internalized the news reports coming out of the U.S. and "endless stories of Mexicans as people who were fleecing the healthcare system, sneaking across the border, [and] being arrested at the border" (8:09). In this dissertation, I am chiefly interested in the stories that Mexicans create about themselves and the Afro-Mexicans who are often left out of these stories.

As a young Afro-Mexican American scholar, growing up in the United States and traveling to Guerrero, Mexico during the summer to visit my maternal grandmother, I noted early on that Afro-Mexicans were not included in the stories that Mexicans created about themselves. I noticed this at first in the *telenovelas* that were aired such as *Rebelde* (2004), *Rubí* (2004), and *La fea más bella* (2006), which were among some of my favorite soap operas growing up. I noted that the actors and actresses in these Mexican soap operas were very white and even those actors who were supposedly ugly like in *La fea más bella* were also white. Yearning to see myself reflected, I would have even been content with an ugly brown beauty on the screen. I thought to myself, "Damn. They won't even cast us brown folk as the ugly characters. It's all white." Early on, it seemed to me like there were two Mexicos. There was the white Mexico that Mexico aspired to be on TV and the real Mexico, which consisted of Mexicans of varying skin shades and hair textures.

But even when I started taking Mexican history courses, in the United States, I noted that Afro-Mexicans were missing from the story of Mexico. In my courses, I was told again and again that Mexico was a *mestizo* country of Spanish European and Native American descent. In her landmark work *Borderlands/ La Frontera* (1987), the first work I ever read about Mexican

Americans in the U.S. Southwest, Gloria Anzaldúa defined the *mestizo* as the violent product of Spanish European and Amerindian contact and sexual reproduction:

> At the beginning of the 16th century, the Spaniards and Hernán Cortés invaded Mexico and, with the help of tribes that the Aztecs had subjugated, conquered it. Before the Conquest, there were twenty-five million Indian people in Mexico and the Yucatán. Immediately after the Conquest, the Indian population had been reduced to under seven million. By 1650, only one-and-a-half-million pure-blooded Indians remained. The *mestizos* who were genetically equipped to survive smallpox, measles, and typhus (Old World diseases to which the natives had no immunity), founded a new hybrid race and inherited Central and South America. *En* 1521 *nació una nueva raza, el mestizo, el mexicano* (people of mixed Indian and Spanish blood), [1] a race that had never existed before. Chicanos, Mexican-Americans, are the offspring of those first matings. (*Borderlands* 16)

In essence, Gloria Anzaldúa defined most Mexicans and all Chicanos and Mexican Americans as *mestizos*: the offspring of Spanish European colonists and Native Americans. Although I was and still am refreshed by Anzaldúa's matter-of-fact style of writing, I was always puzzled at her definition of Mexicans and Mexican Americans because it did not include the Afro-Mexicans I knew existed.

Although *mestizaje* proved to be a useful discourse for some, as seen by Anzaldúa's writing above, it is a discourse that assumes that only one kind of mixture took place in colonial Mexico; in other words, it assumes that the only mixture occurring was the one between

[1] In the preface to her work, Anzaldúa asks readers to meet her halfway and respect the Chicano Spanish of the borderlands. Due to this request, I will not be translating this work in particular in this dissertation.

Spaniards and Amerindians. As Joshua Lund writes in his work *The Mestizo State* (2012), the *mestizo* became exalted by the new Mexican republic as the *true* Mexican, who had defeated centuries of Spanish colonial rule:

> As New Spain became Mexico and the country slowly emerged from the detritus of centuries—long colonial rule, intellectuals, statesmen, and poets rallied around the figure of the *mestizo*—understood as an individual of mixed-race heritage, usually assumed to be of European and indigenous American ancestry—as the symbolic protagonist of a new project of state formation. (ix)

In essence, the *mestizo/a* was already a state backed figure that the new post-colonial elite wanted the people to identify with. Chicanos like Anzaldúa and Oscar Acosta, a self-described Chicano lawyer, took the symbol of the *mestizo* to define themselves in the U.S. Southwest. Through the figure of the *mestizo* they could lay claim to the U.S. Southwest and defend themselves against Anglo racism. *Mestizos* were not an immigrant group that arrived to the U.S. Southwest yesterday but a group with ties to the U.S. Southwest that preceded Anglos' arrival. Through the figure of the *mestizo*, Chicanos became native to the U.S. Southwest and not mere foreigners encroaching into Anglo spaces.

But who is left out of this definition? Afro-Mexicans, of course. As Taunya Lovell Banks argues in her article "*Mestizaje* and the Mexican *Mestizo* Self" (2006), the uncritical celebration of the *mestizo/a* hides the fact that the *mestizo/a* was a privileged category even in the colonial period because it was a racial category that was removed from Blackness; indeed, the caste system set up by the Spanish colonial elite reinforced the idea that those who had no African ancestry such as *mestizos* and *castizos* were better off and had a chance at eventually becoming *españoles* and supposedly bettering the race and their social as well as economic standing (204).

The point that I am trying to make here is that *mestizo/a* is not an inclusive category, and it was never meant to encompass all Mexicans in Mexico or Mexican Americans/ Chicanos in the U.S. Southwest. *Mestizaje* has been used as a type of one size fits all category that is especially not useful for Afro-Mexicans in the Costa Chica. The aim of this dissertation is to challenge what I call *mestizo* normativity. *Mestizo* normativity is the assumption that Mexicans and Mexicans Americans have only two roots: the Spanish European and Amerindian. Chicanos, Mexicans, Mexicans Americans are so much more than hybrids of Spanish and Amerindian culture.

I came up with the term *mestizo* normativity while serving as a teaching assistant at The Harriet Tubman Department of Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at the University of Maryland. After reading Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant's work on queer theory and heteronormativity, it occurred to me that Afro-Mexican literature was being *mestizo*-ized. Meaning that it was being forcibly read through a *mestizo* lens. In their work "Sex in Public" (1998), Warner and Berlant note that heterosexuality only appears to be normal because of public structures that regulate the sex binary:

> This sense of rightness—embedded in things and not just sex—is what we call heteronormativity. Heteronormativity is more than ideology, or prejudice, or phobia against gays and lesbians; it is produced in almost every aspect of the forms and arrangements of social life: nationality, the state, and the law; commerce, medicine; and education. (554)

In their work they note that everything in public life is done with the aim of filtering people through a male/female binary. This binary affects all aspects of daily life and can be seen in the male/female designations in public bathrooms and male/female categories in sports. In a similar

manner, as my dissertation will show, Afro-Mexican literary productions are assumed to be hybrids of Native American and Spanish European literary traditions.

To my knowledge, there is one other scholar who uses the term *mestizo* normativity. David Dalton's use of the term *mestizo* normativity influenced my work when I came across it after coming to the term on my own. In his work *Mestizo Modernity* (2018), Dalton uses the term *mestizo* normativity to refer to the exalting of the mixed-race subject—Native American and Spanish European—in Mexico's 20th century politics:

> By the twentieth century, Mexico's colonial experience had produced a Hegelian master/slave relationship where the country's means of self-representation was patterned after those of its imperial oppressor(s), a fact that was particularly visible with regard to how it engaged both Spain and the United States. As Mexican elites followed this imperial model, they necessarily established internal empires that mirrored those of their own historical colonizers […]. Mestizo normativity found itself at an awkward juncture; while hegemonic in its own national space, global powers treated mestizo identity as a distant "echo" of European whiteness. As mixed-race peoples attempted to validate themselves within these Eurocentric constructs of power, they devalued the indigenous components of their racial and cultural heritage. Statist articulations of postrevolutionary mestizo modernity were highly alienating because they revolved around a desire to emulate a historical conqueror who still refused to recognize the worth of mixed-race subjectivities. As postrevolutionary actors sponsored official articulations of mestizaje, they further validated and institutionalized the racial and gender divisions that had existed since the earliest days of the Conquest. (8)

As Dalton notes, *mestizaje* further internalized imperial models in Mexico that had already been set in motion during the earliest days of colonization. The ideal Mexican citizen was one that had moved away from indigeneity and embraced modernity, progress, and western European whiteness. Moreover, *mestizaje* favored the male over the female. That is to say, *mestizaje* also abided by a gender binary that was transplanted from Europe into Mesoamerica. Dalton uses the term *mestizo* normativity to critique modernity and critics of modernity like Néstor García Canclini (5).

In particular, Dalton criticizes García Canclini for claiming to be moving away from *mestizaje*—from colonial understandings of race—while simultaneously making use of elitist discourses tied to *mestizaje* to propose his new theory of hybridity:

> García Canclini defines modernization as a largely socioeconomic ideal that entails both industrialization and the education of the population at large so that it can participate in modern society. While the critic emphasizes modernism's many failures in bringing about modernization, we should note that proponents of official mestizaje employed elitist discourses and projects in an attempt to modernize "primitive" indigenes through various forms of hybridity. State actors employed at least three different "hybridities" in their quest to transform indigenous people into "modern" mestizos: technological, racial, and cultural. Upon undergoing any of these forms of hybridization, indigenous people could become coded as racially hybrid and mestizo in a cultural, economic, and even genetic sense. Rather than bring about García Canclini's famous notion of "modernism without modernization" then, postrevolutionary thinkers strove to bring about modernization *through* modernism. (6)

In essence, García Canclini uses hybridity not to refer to sexual mixing and "bettering of the race," as José Vasconcelos did in his work *La raza cósmica* (1925), but technological mixing. Still, Dalton argues that this supposed technological uplift already borrows from the realm of *mestizaje* because *mestizaje* defined itself as complete when it had undergone either a racial, cultural, or technological transformation.

As Nestor García Canclini himself writes, hybridity does not come about through the sexual mixing of different races but through the mixing of different technologies, and the mixture of these technologies has been made possible because the world is becoming increasingly globalized:

> there are millions of indigenous people mestizoized with white colonizers, but some have been "chicano-ized" by traveling to the United States; others reshape their habits in relation to the offerings of the mass media; others have acquired a high level of education and enriched their traditional patrimony with aesthetic resources and knowledge from various countries; others incorporate themselves into Korean and Japanese enterprises and fuse their ethnic capital with the disciplines and knowledge of those productive systems. Studying cultural processes, therefore, rather than leading us to affirm self-sufficient identities, is useful for recognizing forms of positioning oneself in the midst of heterogeneity and for understanding how hybridizations are produced. (García Canclini "Introduction")

The access to technology, education, and travel has made Mexico into a hybridized space, but what does this say of race? How is the Mexican defined? How is the Mexican American defined? As García Canclini himself notes, one can become Chicano-ized by traveling to the U.S. Southwest. But how do Chicanos define themselves racially? Who is left out of that definition?

How do Mexicans, depending on what region they inhabit, define themselves racially? Race is the main topic of this dissertation.

I use the term *mestizo* normativity to interrogate how Afro-Mexican works of poetry, folklore, ballads, and stories disrupt *mestizaje*. When referring to *mestizaje*, I use the colonial and present definition that define *mestizas/os* as people of assumed Spanish and Amerindian ancestry. As Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores note in *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* (2010), "we are accustomed to thinking of "Afro" and "Latin@" as distinct from each other and mutually exclusive: one is either Black or Latin@" (1). In essence, those who do not fall neatly along the Black/Latino binary are asked to choose between their identities. They can be either Latino or Black but not both. In a similar fashion, queers and bisexuals are made to choose between the heterosexual/homosexual binary, they can be heterosexuals or homosexuals but not both. As Siobhan Somerville notes in her essay "Queer," "to queer [is] is to denaturalize categories such as "lesbian" and "gay" (not to mention "straight" and "heterosexual"), revealing them as socially and historically constructed identities that have worked to establish and police the line between the "normal" and "abnormal" (198). In essence, to queer means to question the line between "normal" and "abnormal." With these definitions in mind, I read Afro-Mexican literature as queer literature. Afro-Mexicans do not fit neatly along the Afro/Latino binary. Their very existence in a supposedly Black free country brings into question accepted definitions of Mexicans and Mexican Americans.

My dissertation adds to the field of Afro-Mexican Studies. So far, to my knowledge, there is only one writer—Paulette Ramsay—who focuses on the literary production of the Costa Chica. In terms of literary analysis, the field of Afro-Mexican studies is threadbare in Mexico's Costa Chica region. While Ramsay reads Afro-Mexican folklore as part of the greater Caribbean,

I am interested in how Mexican scholars have read Afro-Mexican folklore as *mestizo* folklore. I argue that Afro-Mexican literary productions—ballads, folklore, poetry, and *versos*—are not a mere blend of Spanish and Native American storytelling but share similarities with literary productions in the greater African Diaspora in the Americas, including the Caribbean, and with West and Central African storytelling traditions.

As Nicole von Germeten has pointed out, the African diaspora in Mexico is as much a part of Mexican history as Spanish history. Throughout the colonial period, Spaniards always constituted a small minority in New Spain and were outnumbered by Africans throughout the colonial period:

> From the time of military the conquest of Tenochtitlan, men and women of African descent inhabited the viceroyalty of New Spain. Some of these individuals were descended from Africans living in Spain for generations, but the majority, at least one hundred thousand Africans, arrived in New Spain on board Portuguese slave ships before 1640. Although the descendants of indigenous peoples dominated population numbers for the entire colonial period, before 1640 more Africans than Spaniards came to New Spain. In urban areas, especially the viceregal capital of Mexico City, Africans and their descendants were a significant percentage of the population. (83)

African cultures like European cultures have also influenced *mexicanidad* and are also part of the Mexican and Mexican American family. Given this history, contemporary readings of Mexican works need to consider that Africans also arrived to what was then called New Spain and left their imprint in society just as much as Spanish Europeans did. The non-existence of Afro-Mexicans in the Mexican imagination seems to suggest that Africans were the servants so their

culture didn't matter. By reclaiming and tracing the story of Afro-Mexican literature, my dissertation seeks to change that perception.

I have organized this dissertation into four chapters. In chapter one, "West & Central Africa Remembered in Costa Chica Folklore," I argue that Afro-Mexican folktales share similarities with West and Central African storytelling practices. In my analysis, I note that Afro-Mexican tales have similarities to trickster rabbit tales from the Bantu people in Central Africa and Hausa people in West Africa. And moreover, I note that these tales fall into the *tatsuniya* genre of storytelling found among the Hausa people of West and Central Africa. This genre of tales is known as a subversive category of tales for they include tales of small animals taking down larger animals. I argue that these tales are how Afro-Mexicans in the Costa Chica remember their African heritage and build community. As will be seen in my first chapter, the first scholars to analyze Afro-Mexican folktales moved away from comparing them to West and Central African folklore because they understood all Mexican literature to stem from colonial Mexico's Amerindian and Spanish roots. That is, their readings conformed to *mestizo* normativity. When these Afro-Mexican folktales resisted assimilation, scholars claimed that Afro-Mexican tales were obviously hybrids of Spanish and Native American folklore.

In the second chapter "Connecting Afro-Mexican Poetry, Ballads & *Versos* from the Costa Chica to the African Diaspora in the Americas," I argue that the ballad tradition in the Costa Chica is influenced by West African storytelling traditions. Moreover, I argue that through ballads, *versos*, and maroon poetry, *costeños* disrupt the notion of a *mestizo* Mexico. That is, they question the single story that has been told about Mexico and create a multifaceted and culturally complex site that they recognize as home. To drive this point home, I compare *costeño corridos*

to calypsos and argue for readings that include Afrodiasporic strategies of resistance when dealing with Afrodesendant peoples in the Costa Chica.

In chapter three "Looking Forward & Back: Afro-Mexican Literature from the U.S. Southwest," I read Afro-Mexican works written by writers in the U.S. diaspora. I am focusing on what they add to the field of Mexican American studies. In essence, I examine how these writers' perceptions of race are formed in the U.S. and I examine how and why these writers look to Mexico to make sense of their shared Black and Mexican ancestry. Moreover, I am interested in how these writers disrupt notions of assumed *mestizo* normativity through their writings.

Lastly, in chapter four, "Afro-Mexican Activism and Scholarship Through the Lens of Three Contemporary Afro-Mexican Writers," I examine how contemporary writers such as Aleida Violeta Vázquez Cisneros, Abel Emigdio Baños Delgado, and Filemón Silva Sandoval use social media to promote their written works and challenge readings that depict Mexico as a Black-free space.

Methodology

For this study, I am using qualitative methods—interviews, textual analysis, and field research—and I am drawing from the fields of history, sociology, anthropology, queer studies, African studies, and Mexican and Mexican American studies. In chapter one, I use the folklore collection *Jamás fandango al cielo* (1993), which was published by the *Dirección General de Culturas Populares* in Mexico City.

In chapter two, I analyze *corridos* from the Costa Chica of Guerrero and Oaxaca as well as poetry and *versos* from *Alma Cimarrona: versos costeños y poesía regional* (1999). *Alma Cimarrona* is a compilation of *versos* and poetry collected by Angustia Torres Díaz and Israel

Reyes Larrea from the Costa Chica of Guerrero and Oaxaca. In addition to *corridos*, *versos*, and poetry, I rely on my own firsthand experience and field notes from my research trips in the Costa Chica of Guerrero and Oaxaca in 2022 and 2023, and Oaxaca City, Oaxaca and Cuernavaca, Morelos in 2022.

In chapter three, I analyze María Rosario Jackson's autobiography in *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* (2010), Ariana Brown's collections of poetry *Sana Sana* (2020) and *We are Owed* (2021), and Alán Pelaez Lopez's poetry collection *Intergalactic Travels* (2020).

In chapter four, I rely on my field notes and interviews from Mexico City, Cuernavaca, Oaxaca, and video interviews, which I conducted with writers, filmmakers, and artists from April to December 2022.

I work with these primary sources because they constitute works where Afro-Mexicans speak and write for themselves and are not imagined or recreated by the *mestizo* imagination. There are plenty of Mexican American works that portray Afro-Mexican characters such as *George Washington Gómez* (1990) by Américo Paredes and *Caramelo* (2002) by Sandra Cisneros, but, in my estimation, these works imagine and fictionalize the lives of Afro-Mexican people rather than give them space to tell their own stories.

My dissertation concludes that Mexican and Mexican American studies have been hindered by *mestizo* normativity from achieving their full potential. As will be shown in this dissertation, whatever cultural productions emerge out of the Costa Chica are automatically recycled into the world of *mestizaje*. If a storyteller in the Costa Chica comes up with a tale about a rabbit, that rabbit will be analyzed for its similarities to Native American or European folklore rather than the African roots from which the living and breathing Afro-Mexican came. The resounding justification for these analyses and conclusions are that Afro-Mexicans do not

have a culture or that they do not remember their culture. But Afro-Mexicans do have a culture and they remember it. It just might be easier to believe that they do not have one or have forgotten it. It may be easier to believe in *mestizo* exceptionalism, homogeneity rather than diversity.

Mestizo normativity arose to make the world safer and more bearable for the colonist. As Antonio Cornejo Polar has noted, "*mestizaje* […] offers a harmonious image of what is obviously disjointed and confrontational, proposing representations that deep down are only relevant to those from whom it is convenient to imagine our societies as smooth and non-conflictive spaces of coexistence" (760). It is only by refusing to believe in the myth of harmonious coexistence that Afro-Mexican works can begin to be read and appreciated for the fantastic stories that they are. Mexico is composed of a diasporic group of people. It would be a shame to read everything through a compulsory *mestizo* lens.

Some Limitations of My Dissertation

One of the major limits of my dissertation is my lack of inclusion of indigenous folktales from the Mixtec, Amuzgo, or Zapotec people, who have historically had and have a high degree of social contact with Afro-Mexicans. For they, the indigenous Mixtec, Zapotec, and Amuzgo, have historically lived alongside Afro-Mexicans, or better yet, Afro-Mexicans have historically lived alongside them. Future studies will include comparative readings of indigenous and Afro-Mexican folktales as well as field interviews with indigenous storytellers. In the future, I hope to show exactly how Afro-Mexican folktales have been influenced by Amerindian storytelling traditions. As my dissertation will show, there is only an assumption that Afro-Mexican folktales are influences, but the how and to what extent have yet to be examined.

Chapter One: West & Central Africa Remembered in Costa Chica Folklore

> *Los afromexicanos, somos los más olvidados de todos los pueblos de México. Debemos revisar nuestra historia para reafirmar nuestra identidad.*
>
> —Encuentro de Pueblos Negros, 2001

> We Afro-Mexicans are the most forgotten of all of the Mexican peoples. We must review our history in order to reassert our identity.[2]
>
> —Meeting of Black Communities, 2001[3]

I begin this chapter with an objective formulated by the participants at the 5th Meeting of Black Communities[4] which took place from the 22nd to the 25th of March 2001 in Santiago Tapextla, Oaxaca. The Meeting of Black Communities is a community-led organization which began in 1997. The First Meeting of Black Communities took place in El Ciruelo, Pinotepa Nacional, Oaxaca in 1997, and was led by Father Glyn Jemmott Nelson, a Trinidadian priest who voluntarily relocated to Oaxaca, Mexico to work exclusively with Afro-Mexican communities. In her work *Afro-Mexican Construction of Diaspora* (2016), Paulette Ramsay details her travel to Oaxaca, Mexico in the summer of 2013 and shares her interview with Father Glyn. As Father

[2] Unless stated otherwise, all translations are my own.
[3] In order to assert the importance of the reclaiming and of the term as a signifier of a trans-national ethnicity, I will follow the example of many other scholars and capitalize the word "Black" when referring to Afro diasporic peoples.
[4] The region of Luanda, Angola that is covered in this chapter is referred to as being part of Central or Southern Africa by scholars. As an Afro-Mexican scholar, I refer to Angola as being part of Central Africa to keep consistency with other Afro-Mexican scholars such as Colin Palmer and Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán.

Glyn states, in his own words, when he arrived to El Ciruelo, Oaxaca around 1983, he was met with hostility from Afro-Mexicans who told him "*un negro no puede ser sacerdote, somos gente corriente, somos para el machetero*," which roughly translates to, "a Black man cannot be a priest. We are a simple people; we are for machete work" (*Afro-Mexican Constructions* "Conclusion"). In other words, Father Glyn disrupted what Afro-Mexicans in El Ciruelo, Oaxaca, in the 80s, thought was acceptable work for a Black man.

Ramsay's interviews with Father Glyn demonstrate how vital it was for Afro-Mexicans to see a Black man in a position of authority and to see themselves as more than an abandoned group of people who were only good for hard labor. The Meeting of Black Communities was started to form a sense of community and for Afro-Mexicans to collectively push for their rights. As the participants at the 5th Meeting of Black Communities noted, Afro-Mexicans need to be aware of their own history so that they could be agents of their own future (Weltman-Cisneros and Méndez Tello 153).

I start off my first chapter with this powerful collective objective because it has become commonplace today to dismiss the idea that Mexico has an African heritage and history. Since popular narrative suggests that there is nothing African about Mexico, the contributions of Afro-Mexican people are dismissed, ignored, or attributed to belonging to Mexico's Spanish and/or Native American traditions by the general populace.

In this chapter, I challenge the popular notion that Mexico has no African history or heritage. I compare Afro-Mexican trickster rabbit tales to trickster stories found throughout West and Central African folklore. I argue that Afro-Mexican folklore is not just a blend of Spanish and Native American folklore but that Afro-Mexican folktales also share similarities with pre-

colonial West and Central African storytelling practices popular in other parts of the Americas, including anglophone and francophone regions.

To date, the best-known scholar to contest that Afro-Mexican folklore is not a hybrid of only Spanish and Amerindian folklore is Paulette Ramsay, a Jamaican academic, who studies race relations in the Caribbean and Mexico. Besides Ramsay, there are no scholars to my knowledge who try to understand Afro-Mexican folklore as part of the cultural output of the African diaspora in the Americas.

In her works, Ramsay has argued that the trickster Afro-Mexican rabbit *El Tío Conejo* resembles the spider trickster Anancy from Ghana, who subverts dominant power structures and brings down animals who are much larger and more powerful than him by using his wit ("Establishing an Independent Identity" 9). According to Ramsay, Afro-Mexicans use trickster rabbit tales to pass on strategies of resistance from generation to generation ("Establishing an Independent Identity" 10). In essence, these tales remind the colonized that they need not be powerful or hold all the power to overthrow their oppressors. Ramsay reads Afro-Mexican rabbit trickster tales for their subversive qualities.

Although the comparative analyses that Ramsay has drawn between Anancy and *El Tío Conejo* are powerful in themselves, like all good research, her research pushes scholars to ask even more questions. In this chapter, I investigate the origins of *El Tío Conejo* and the origins of the Afro-Mexican people of the Costa Chica to understand how a folk tale figure like Anancy—from Ghana—shares similarities with another trickster figure called *El Tío Conejo,* a continent away. In this chapter, I argue that *El Tío Conejo* comes from a specific African storytelling tradition of resistance classified as *tatsuniya* tales, which are native to West and Central Africa.

Scholars may have overlooked *El Tío Conejo*'s African origins to keep in line with the idea of a *mestizo* (Spanish and Amerindian) Mexico that rose to prominence in the 20th century. As Pedro Palou has noted, the Mexican Revolution gave birth to *mexicanidad* or *mestizaje*. *Mestizaje* is a means by which the indigenous person was incorporated into the capitalist system. Through *mestizaje*—the myth of racial unity and culture—the social order of one single language and nationalism is legitimized (Palou 15). In other words, talks of racial progress were really fronts for convincing Mexico's Native American peoples to let go of their indigenous ways and their lands in the process.

In order to prove my argument, I have broken up this chapter into four sections. In the first section, I examine the origins of Mexico's Afro-Mexican people. In my second section, I trace the journey of the trickster rabbit from Central and Western Africa to the U.S. South and Mexico. I argue that the trickster rabbit has been transforming and taking on different animal shapes depending on where his tales are being told. Moreover, I argue that *El Tío Conejo*, who is present in the Costa Chica, is a blend of West and Central African folklore and that the unique characteristics that *El Tío Conejo* has in Mexico are due in part to the blending of West and Central African cultures that took place in the Costa Chica of Mexico. In my third section, I argue that Afro-Mexican folklore has been analyzed as a blend of indigenous and Spanish European folklore because Black identity in Mexico has been undervalued and subsumed into other cultures since the colonial period in Mexico. In this section, I demonstrate how the national ideology of *mestizaje* affected how scholars analyzed and understood Afro-Mexican tales. By analyzing the prefaces in *Jamás fandango al cielo* (1993), I show how nationalist projects for a *mestizo* Mexico—a nation supposedly devoid of present-day African culture—affected even scholars who were trying to bring Afro-Mexican folklore to light. Finally, in the fourth section, I

examine three trickster rabbit stories from the Costa Chica and compare them to similar stories that can be found throughout West & Central Africa. By making this comparison, I show that Afro-Mexican folklore is in dialogue with West and Central African storytelling traditions. In other words, West and Central African storytelling practices are remembered in the Costa Chica.

For my methodology, I selected trickster rabbit tales in the folklore collection *Jamás fandango al Cielo* (1993). I chose this collection because it is one of the first attempts by researchers in Mexico to transcribe and collect Costa Chica folklore. Moreover, the prefaces in the collection demonstrate how the anthropologists and linguists assigned to this project struggled to analyze Afro-Mexican folklore in a country where African traditions supposedly do not exist.

Jamás fandango al cielo consists of Afro-Mexican tales from the Mexican state of Guerrero, which is one of the two states, the state of Oaxaca being the other, that make up the heart of Black Mexico, colloquially known as the Costa Chica. The oral stories in *Jamás fandango al cielo* were recorded and transcribed by Mexican anthropologists working with "endangered languages" and Afro-Mexican traditions in Guerrero, Mexico. As will be seen in this chapter, Afro-Mexican dialects and traditions are not endangered but rather form part of an Afro-Mexican's upbringing. Additionally, I rely on my field notes from a trip to Mexico in April 2022 to make sense of how Afro-Mexicans view themselves and the works that they produce. In other words, I am interested in not only what scholars have to say about these folktales but how Afro-Mexican people use these folktales. I am interested in the social function of folklore in the Costa Chica.

Section One: The Origins of Afro-Mexicans

As for the origins of Mexico's Afro-Mexican peoples, historians have noted that Afro-Mexicans living in present-day Mexico are of West and Central African descent. Colin Palmer notes that during the 16th and 17th centuries, enslaved Africans bound for New Spain were primarily taken from West and Central Africa. Since the beginning of Spanish colonization in Mexico, West Africans were forcibly brought to not only the Caribbean but also mainland North, Meso- and South American countries. About 80% of African-born Afro-Mexicans between 1545 and 1556 came from the present-day West African countries of Senegal and Guinea-Bissau and 12% came from other parts of West Africa such as Sierra Leone, Guinea, Liberia, and São Tomé and Príncipe (Palmer 20). After the 16th century, enslaved Africans were no longer taken from West Africa but instead Central Africa. In the 17th century, 75% of the enslaved Africans forcibly taken to New Spain consisted primarily of Luandans from Angola (Palmer 22). What this means is that New Spain participated in the transatlantic slave trade and thus has an Afrodiasporic history and people. The resemblance of Afro-Mexican tales to their West and Central African counterparts is a part of Afro-Mexicans' Afro-diasporic heritage.

As Herman L. Bennett notes, enslaved Africans entering New Spain generally experienced one of two fates. Those who were sent to work against their will in areas with a low number of enslaved Africans eventually lost their identity and their descendants began to identify as *mestizos* (racially mixed persons of Spanish and Native American descent); on the other hand, enslaved Africans sent to work in large slaveholding estates with significant African populations retained their identity, culture, and idiosyncrasies for a longer period of time:

> Local slaveholding patterns and indigenous communities shaped the idiosyncratic nature of the transformation process in fundamental ways. In those areas with a small African population liberally dispersed, the descendants of Africans tended to blend physically and culturally, eventually acquiring identities as Indians or Spaniards but most likely as mestizos, the offspring of Spaniards and Indians. Manifest throughout New Spain, this pattern of absorption or "disappearance" occurred in both urban and rural areas. In contrast, in those areas with a significant enslaved population congregated on large estates–Veracruz, Guerrero, Guanajuato, Oaxaca, Morelos, Michoacan–the African population retained its distinctive physical presence for a longer period. (Bennett 27)

The states of Guerrero and Oaxaca, which are the focus of this dissertation, fall under the list of Mexican states that brought in enslaved Africans to work on large plantations. The Afro-Mexicans assigned to work in the Costa Chica were most likely able to keep a sense of their culture and stories because they were bound together and isolated from the rest of Mexican society for a longer period of time.

As journalist Randal C. Archibold notes, in his article in the *New York Times* "Negro? Prieto? Moreno?" (2014), during his travels to José María Morelos, Oaxaca in 2014, Afro-Mexicans have historically kept to themselves and continue to keep to themselves for survival:

> While traveling outside of their communities, black Mexicans say they are stopped routinely by the police and accused of being illegal immigrants from Cuba or Central America. They often endure long stares and even touching of their hair by curious fellow Mexicans. That unfamiliarity comes in part because Mexico's black populations, often to escape persecution and discrimination, historically never moved in large numbers to big

> cities and have kept largely to themselves in scattered communities in three southern states: Oaxaca, Guerrero and Veracruz.

As Archibald notes, Afro-Mexicans who were sent to work on plantations retained their West and Central African characteristics such as curly hair and dark skin. Through no fault of their own, Afro-Mexicans are commonly viewed as foreigners when traveling outside of their Afro-Mexican communities.

By contrast, Afro-Mexicans sent to work in the interior of Mexico experienced interracial mixing to a greater extent. As Patricia Seed notes, the inhabitants of Mexico City experienced racial mixing to a greater degree than any other town or city in New Spain:

> The capital city provided the opportunity for far greater contact between individuals of different races than did the rural regions or smaller towns of New Spain. Mexico City was thus an area in which racial mingling took place on a large scale and the assortment of displaced rural groups and ethnic mixtures was among the greatest in the empire […]. Over the three centuries of the colonial era, there emerged in Mexico an intermediate group of people of mixed racial origin. The mixed-bloods were known collectively as *castas*, but a variety of distinct names [were] applied to each of the individual mixed combinations. (572)

To this day, many Afro-Mexicans in the Costa Chica of Oaxaca and Guerrero know about the nation's history of enslavement, which they preserve through oral tales. Afro-Mexicans sent to work in Mexico City began to lose their sense of a Black identity as they also lost connection with others sharing their culture. As Patricia Seed notes, by 1811, census takers in Mexico City no longer asked inhabitants if they were Black (577).

In contrast to Mexico City and other parts of Mexico, race developed differently in the Costa Chica. Blacks in the Costa Chica have tended to marry one another and thus strengthened and reinforced their Black identity in the colonial and post-colonial period. Ben Vinson's historical research on marriage in the Costa Chica in the late eighteenth century shows that free Afro-Mexicans were more likely to intermarry within their own group than to marry indigenous or white people. As Vinson states, "no free-colored man took a white bride, or even a fair skinned castiza […] Free-coloreds tended to intermarry more frequently with Indians, [but] Indian [Native American] intermarriage rates were probably lowered by the physical distance which separated them" [5] (280). Vinson's research is even further supported by ethnographic research carried out by Bobby Vaughn in 1997. In his work on the Costa Chica, Vaughn notes that Afro-Mexicans on the Costa Chica tended to marry one another and most of their family trees can be traced back to common Afro-Mexican surnames ("Afro-Mexico" 124).

During my research stays in the Costa Chica between April 2022 and January 2022, I have noted that most Afro-Mexicans in the Costa Chica tend to marry one another simply because they are in close proximity to one another more than anyone else. Costa Chica towns up and down the Pacific Coast of Guerrero and Oaxaca tend to be isolated and lack public transportation or even paved roads for residents to navigate in and out of their hometowns safely.

At an Afro-Mexican wedding that I had the honor to attend on December 27, 2022, in Santiago Llano Grande, Oaxaca, I noted that there was a lack of sanitation services such as trash disposal or even running water. Residents have to pile up their trash and burn it and bury the ashes. And if they need water, they need to buy it from a water vendor who fills up his truck with water and then comes and fills up the family's water tank which is called a *pila*. I say all of this

[5] Castizas and castizos are those who are three quarters Spanish and one quarter Amerindian.

to illustrate that there simply are not many opportunities for Afro-Mexicans to marry anyone else because Afro-Mexican towns are so remote.

At the wedding of Brisa Valdez Prudente, a respondent who became a friend, all the couples consisted of Native Americans or Afro-Mexicans. And Brisa was marrying a fellow Afro-Mexican from Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero, whom she met through mutual friends. I enclose a photo of Brisa on her wedding day below. The photo was taken on December 22, 2022, in Santiago Llano Grande, Oaxaca:

Figure 1: Left to right: Brisa's stepfather, wearing a cream white button-down dress shirt, Brisa's maternal grandmother, wearing a blue dress, Brisa, the bride, Brisa's mother, wearing a gold dress, and Brisa's stepbrother, wearing a white suit.

In remote areas like Santiago Llano Grande, where Brisa and her family are from, it is not uncommon, as occurs in many other places, for people to marry and form bonds with those who they are in close proximity with.

Given this data, it is possible that enslaved Afro-Mexicans who once labored along the Pacific Coast of Guerrero were sufficient in number to form their own sense of identity and culture. In fact, Afro-Mexicans from the states of Guerrero and Oaxaca are sufficient in number to this day to hold onto their unique traditions, foregrounding, for example, the Dance of the Devils, which honors the African god Ruja, whom they danced to during colonial times to petition for their liberation ("La Danza de Los Diablos"). Below I enclose a picture taken from the *Gobierno de México* webpage titled "La Danza de los Diablos" so that readers can get a sense of the elaborate costumes and artistry that this dance requires:

Figure 2:Picture taken from the Gobierno de México webpage titled "La Danza de los Diablos"

As may be seen from the picture above, the dance is usually performed by men and the masks that are supposed to represent the devils consist of horsehair, goat horns, and leather. Hugo Arrellanes Antonio, an Afro-Mexican photographer, shared with me that these masks take weeks to make. If the mask is made of leather, as most are, the leather needs to be cured and everything is put together and stitched by hand.

The first time I saw the Dance of the Devils was at the *I Foro de Jovenes Afro-Mexicanos: Historia, identidad, pertenencia y orgullo afromexicano* held in Huatulco, Oaxaca by the *Asociación de Mujeres de las Costa de Oaxaca* (AMCO) from April 8th to the 10th, 2022. During this three-day conference aimed at young Afro-Mexican filmmakers and multimedia artists from around the world, the young participants demanded a recess to stretch their bodies after sitting and listening to presentations nearly all day. One of the Afro-Mexican participants started playing his tiny drum and the rest of the young participants caught on to the beat and started dancing the Devil Dance. It was amazing to see how in sync they danced despite being from different parts of the Costa Chica. Once the dance ended, they collectively shouted out, "Ruja!"

As David Montaño, a professional Devil Dance mask maker and musician from Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero notes, "the Dance of the Devils comes from Africa, and it is a dance that has been passed down from generation to generation. It is in our blood. As soon as the beat drops, children start dancing and people get goosebumps and get the urge to join in and start dancing as well" (*La danza de los Diablos Negros* 3:38). In the Costa Chica, unlike in other parts of Mexico, West and Central African traditions are remembered in song and storytelling. One hero of folktales who is most prominent in the Costa Chica is *El Tío Conejo*. In the next section, I examine the origins of *El Tío Conejo*.

Section II: The Origins of *El Tío Conejo* from the Costa Chica

When I first read the Afro-Mexican folk story collection *Jamás fandango al cielo* (1993), I was intrigued and frustrated by a recurrent figure named *El Conejo* or *El Tío Conejo*, who had almost a whole section of a four-part collection dedicated just to him and his escapades. Who could this figure be? And why was he so important that he appeared more than any other character in the collection? When I shared my frustration with my colleague Dominique Young over a plate of *pupusas*, she exclaimed, "*El Tio Conejo* sounds like Brother Rabbit." After hearing this, I did all the research I could on Brother Rabbit from the U.S. South and I kept following this trickster rabbit all the way back to West and Central Africa and learned about his origins and his journeys to the U.S. South and the Costa Chica.

As for Brother Rabbit, here is what folklorists have to say. Alice Werner notes that the trickster rabbit that is known throughout the United States because of Joel Chandler Harris's work *Uncle Remus, his songs and his sayings* (1880), a collection of African American oral tales from the Turnwold Plantation in Eatonton, Georgia, has roots in Central African storytelling traditions. As Werner notes, the oral stories that Harris recorded were brought from Africa and did not spontaneously emerge in the United States but rather had longstanding roots in Central African storytelling traditions:

> The Uncle Remus stories, which suddenly became so popular about fifty years ago, not only delighted both young and old, but attracted the serious attention of folklore students. It is now generally recognized-though the point was hotly debated at first-that they originally came from Africa, brought by the Negro slaves, who, in the southern states, seem mostly to have belonged to Bantu-speaking tribes. (Werner "Brer Rabbit in Africa")

It is now accepted as a matter of course that oral stories in the U.S. South come from an African storytelling tradition but this was not always the case. As Emily Zobel Marshall notes, at the time that Harris was collecting stories between 1870 and 1906, it was presumed that the stories formerly enslaved Africans were recounting were of Native American and/or European origin (Marshall 33).

As the journey of the trickster rabbit is analyzed, it is important to remember that when Brother Rabbit tales were being collected by white American academics such as Joel Chandler Harris, the nation was steeped in notions of white supremacy. As Marshall notes, Brother Rabbit was denied his African heritage precisely because folklore scholarship in the 19th century was committed to downplaying Black culture so that segregation seemed reasonable and justified post-slavery, which legally ended with the Emancipation Proclamation in 1865:

> The impact of a longer period of plantation slavery combined with these factors, and continued segregation under Jim Crow [...] affected the interpretation of the Brer Rabbit tales in America and resulted in the desire, amongst some members of the scholarly community in particular, to deny the African origins of the tales and manipulate the narratives to support damaging black stereotypes and Jim Crow laws. The need to legitimize segregation in the South in the twentieth century partly hinged on devaluing and ridiculing black culture, and the great origins debate reflects the complex and often contradictory attitudes white Americans had towards African American folklore during this period. (24)

In other words, it was easier for most white Americans to believe and support segregation if they could be convinced that Black Americans had no culture and were supposedly subhuman in comparison to whites. The colonization of African Americans in the United States hinged on

dehumanizing not only African Americans' bodies but also on stomping out any art or culture they produced. The paradox that Brother Rabbit tales presented in the 19th century is that they proved that Blacks in the U.S. South possessed a collective culture and consciousness at a time when Blacks supposedly had no culture.

But the question remains: if Brother Rabbit was born in Central Africa among the Bantu people, how did he wind up in West African folklore? And most importantly, how did he end up in Mexico's Southern Pacific Coast? As Kimberly A. Christen has noted, the trickster hare is not unique to Central Africa but can also be found among the West African Hausa people (245). The Hausa are a native ethnic group in West and Central Africa and reside in Nigeria, Niger, Benin, Ivory Coast, Cameroon, Chad, Ghana, Sudan, the Central African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Togo, Gabon, Gambia, Algeria, Burkina Faso, and the Republic of the Congo ("Hausa"). As Alice Werner has speculated, trickster hares became trickster rabbits in the so-called New World because there were no hares in the U.S. South:

> Uncle Remus, knowing more about rabbits than hares, has turned him into Brer Rabbit, just as the hyena (who cheats and ill-treats the hare, and is finally 'bested' by him) has become Brer Wolf or Brer Fox. If Uncle Remus nearly always gives animals a title-'Brer Rabbit,' 'Mis' Cow,' and so on-this must be because his African forefathers did the same; we generally find them distinguished in some way when figuring in tales; sometimes, indeed, they are called by quite a different name. (Werner "Introductory")

In the same fashion that African Americans in the U.S. South transformed the trickster hare into Brother Rabbit, Afro-Mexicans may have very well transformed *Zomo* the hare into Uncle Rabbit because there are no hares in the Costa Chica, which is a tropical region unsuitable for hares to live in. Moreover, instead of calling *Zomo* "brother" as African Americans in the U.S.

South do, Afro-Mexicans call *Zomo* "uncle" because it is a sign of respect. For example, when my mother's close friends visit our home, I do not call them by their first names but call them *tía* or *tío* as a sign of respect and inclusion. The naming of this trickster hare as "uncle" in Afro-Mexican folklore also points to the high ranking that he has among Afro-Mexicans in the Costa Chica. He is a folk character to be treated with respect and honor.

The oral tales of *Zomo* the clever hare fall under the Hausa's *tatsuniya* genre of oral narrative (Christen 59). The *tatsuniya* storytellers are generally women, who use these tales to teach their children how to behave properly (Christen 59). As Christen notes, the *tatsuniya* is a feminine form of folklore that differs from other Hausa genres due to the human role that animals play in the tales:

> The *tatsuniya* genre is typified by its use of animals in human roles; that is, animals are given human characteristics. The stories are generally entertaining and educational; they contain morals and demonstrate socially acceptable ways of behaving in Hausa society. In addition, the Hausa have several other categories of oral narrative and prose: *kirari*, the praise-epitaph; *yabo*, the praise-song; *labari*, history and biography; and *waka*, poetry. Each of these genres was established prior to outside contact. (42)

What this means is that the instruction of children and their rearing into proper citizens falls on the shoulders of women. Women it seems are responsible for keeping children entertained *and* teaching them about the values of the society that they are born into.

What is also interesting about the *tatsuniya* genre is that it is not only used in the instruction of children but also as a form of back talk to oppressive regimes and systems. As Christen further notes, there are three main characters that make up the *tatsuniya* genre: *Zomo*, the trickster hare, *Dila*, the trickster jackal, and *Gizo*, the trickster spider (245). The *Gizo* is used

to point out the "economical, political, and social challenges [...] faced by the Hausa people. Because of the stratification of Hausa society, rural people are constantly under the control of the elite rulers. The stories of *Gizo* demonstrate the frustrations of the rural Hausa people with the imbalance of power in their society" (59). In other words, the *Gizo* becomes a way for the rural Hausa people to envision revenge on their unjust rules. Moreover, due to his small size, the *Gizo* demonstrates that one does not need to be stronger than one's opponent to beat him, only brighter and more patient.

In one famous *Gizo* story, transcribed by Christen in *Clowns and Tricksters: An Encyclopedia of Tradition and Culture* (1998), *Gizo* takes revenge on a lion who has taken advantage of his generosity (59). One day *Gizo* was cooking fish and a lion came up to him and asked him for a fish. The lion kept on asking for more and more fish until *Gizo* had none left for himself or his family. Afterwards, *Gizo* came up with a plan to exact revenge on the lion. Once the lion was done eating, *Gizo* saw a bush owl and told the lion that he had made the bush owl's beautiful spotted plumage and that now the bush owl was too conceited to even say hello to others. Upon seeing the beautiful spotted feathers on the owl, the lion begged *Gizo* to make him the same beautiful feathers. After much persuasion, *Gizo* agreed to make the lion feathers like the bush owl but *Gizo* told the lion that he would need to find a strong *kazaura* tree that would not snap once he was hung from it and a big bush cow for the process. Once the lion found a strong *kazaura* tree to be hung from and a big bush cow, the lion stretched himself out and allowed *Gizo* to bind him tightly and hang him from the tree. Once the lion was tightly bound to the *kazaura* tree, *Gizo* poked the lion with a hot skewer until he was covered in spots and left with the meat from the big bush cow. The gist of the *Gizo* tales is that even the smallest animals can fight back and bring down large and powerful animals if they are clever and bide their time.

These tales are told to boost morale and to encourage the Hausa to stand up for themselves in the face of injustice and powers that may seem greater than them.

Afro-Mexicans' unique sense of identity and culture is evident in their folklore. In the two trickster rabbit tales I examine from *Jamás fandango al cielo*, it is evident that folklore in the Costa Chica of Guerrero is influenced by West and Central African storytelling traditions. Instead of saying that the folklore in the Costa Chica strictly comes from West Africa or Central African storytelling traditions, I contend that it comes from both because Costa Chica folklore does not follow a strict West African or Central African pattern of storytelling. Moreover, it is also influenced by European and Native American traditions. After all, the tales are written in Spanish, but the Native American and European influences of Afro-Mexican oral tales are beyond the scope of this dissertation and its purpose, which is to highlight Mexico's African heritage.

Uncle Rabbit seems to embody both the spirit of *Zomo*, a trickster hare found in West and Central African Hausa folklore, and *Wakalulu*, a Central African trickster hare found among the Lamba people of Central Africa, Zimbabwe, and the Congo. At times, the Costa Chica Uncle Rabbit behaves like *Zomo* and hurts others simply for his own gain. As Christen notes, *Zomo* "uses his wisdom to get what he wants, in any way possible and without regard for other people's wellbeing" (245). One example of Uncle Rabbit acting like *Zomo* can be seen in the folktale "El Tío Conejo." In this tale, Uncle Rabbit thinks of a way to pay off his debts without having to pay anyone back. Uncle Rabbit claims to have corn for sale and he goes around town selling corn. Aunt Cockroach, Aunt Hen, the fox, the dog, the tiger, and the hunter all purchase corn from Uncle Rabbit. Uncle Rabbit gives them each a different time to stop by and pick up the corn. When Aunt Cockroach arrives, Uncle Rabbit pretends to be making *atole*, a hot corn

beverage. But, in reality, he is boiling a rock in a pot of water. When Uncle Rabbit sees Aunt Hen coming down the road, he feigns concern for Aunt Cockroach's safety and orders her to hide in the corn husks. When Aunt Hen arrives to collect her corn, Uncle Rabbit keeps her entertained by telling her that a treat is waiting for her in the cornhusks. Aunt Hen spots Aunt Cockroach in the corn husks and eats her. Uncle Rabbit repeats this pattern of deceit until all of his clients are dead (38). In this tale, the trickster rabbit only thinks about himself and his own survival rather than anyone else's.

But at times, Uncle Rabbit also takes on the characteristics of *Wakalulu*. According to Christen, *Wakalulu*, a cunning Central African hare, represents "a character who proves that power does not belong only to the strong and that actions may have more than one outcome" (Christen 223). In the Costa Chica folktale "*El Conejo, El Leon y El Grillo*" (The Rabbit, the Lion, and the Cricket), Uncle Rabbit puts an end to the lion's boasting by pitting him against King Cricket, the king of all the insects (57). In this tale, Uncle Rabbit resembles *Wakalulu* and brings down the lion a notch not out of sheer joy but to remind the lion that as much as he may boast and brag about being the strongest and fiercest, a pack of unified, small insects can still bring him down. Thus, Uncle Rabbit acts the way he does to keep the lion's hubris in check and to remind everyone else that when they work together, they are not powerless against the lion. The lion is of course a metaphor for oppressive regimes and institutions that abuse their power. Trickster tales seem to be used to boost morale and remind people who believe that they are powerless that they are not powerless when they work collectively towards a common goal.

Given the colonial history of Africans in Mexico, it is understandable that some scholars would avoid focusing on Africa. Mexico's African history as a whole is undervalued and underestimated. For as much as Mexican scholars have repeatedly claimed that there is no color

line in Mexico, there clearly is one and there are heritages and histories in Mexico that are more valued and celebrated than others. The undervaluing and underestimating of Mexico's African culture can be seen clearly in the prefaces in *Jamás fandango al cielo*, which will be analyzed in the next section.

Section III: A Brief History of Race in Latin America & the Prefaces in *Jamás fandango al cielo*

In this section, I present a brief history of race in Latin America before analyzing the prefaces to *Jamás fandango al cielo*. It is only by understanding the way that race has developed in Mexico and much of Latin America that the prefaces to *Jamás* can make sense and can be understood as the attempt of scholars to fit Afro-Mexican folklore into popular understandings of race at the time.

The Regional Units of Popular Cultures, based in Mexico, compiled the oral tales in *Jamás fandango al cielo* as part of their larger Afro-Mexican awareness project called Our Third Root: Presence of African Cultures in Mexico in 1989. The aim of the project was to shed light on Mexico's African history and its Afro-Mexican population. The goal of Our Third Root involved challenging assumptions about Mexican identity that had been cemented in perceptions of Mexico's past.

In these prefaces, the researchers who were appointed to highlight Mexico's Afro-Mexican folklore did so in a way that left readers questioning whether Afro-Mexican culture even existed in the Costa Chica. As will be seen, in the prefaces, Mexico's Afro-Mexican people are sometimes presented as not being African at all but rather Black Spaniards. The point here is

that the researchers at times seem to want to reinforce a politics of *mestizo* Mexico instead of questioning the validity of a notion of *mestizo* Mexico altogether.

As David Dalton notes, talks of unifying the Mexican nation under the banner of *mestizaje* predate the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917) and actually came about during the Porfiriato (1876-1911):

> Mestizaje (both cultural and genetic) represented a means through which Amerindians could assimilate to the state, but it also became a tool for erasing indigenous societies. The key functional role of racial hybridity became especially clear in Mexico by the late nineteenth century, when the *científicos*—a group of positivist bureaucrats in the Porfirian administration—began to invoke paradigms of eugenics. Because most people in the country (including elites) were mestizos to some degree, Mexican eugenics rejected the northern European belief that racial miscegenation was necessarily dysgenic […] the very existence of these debates shows that discourses of race, science, and the body were already mutually constructing each other in an attempt to define the Mexican nation long before the Revolution. (4)

In essence, Mexico's elites walked a tightrope. They wanted to move the Mexican nation towards "progress" and "modernity" but they had to find a way to explain and exalt their own Native American ancestry, which at the time was believed to be naturally inferior to and the opposite of western European and American modernity.

One of the Mexican scholars who popularized *mestizaje* in Mexico was José Vasconcelos. Vasconcelos' work *La raza cósmica: misión de la raza iberoamericana* (The Cosmic Race: Mission of the Ibero-American Race) (1925) is arguably the most cited and most controversial work when it comes to race relations in post-Revolutionary Mexico. His work detailed the ideal way in which the Mexican race or what he referred to as such ought to progress and mix or not mix with other races. In his work he declared that the Mexican people were a Europeanized people, who possessed Spanish blood, and that Mexico's Native Americans had no other door to the future but one that had been paved by European civilization (Vasconcelos 16). In Vasconcelos's racial plans for the Mexican nation, the Native American and Black races cease to exist and give way to the *mestizo* race, which supposedly makes up contemporary Mexican society:

> The lower types of the species will be absorbed by the superior type. In this manner, for example, the Black could be redeemed, and step-by-step, by voluntary extinction, the uglier stocks will give way to the more handsome. […] The Indian [Native American], by grafting onto the related race, would take the jump of millions of years that separate Atlantis from our times, and in a few decades of aesthetic eugenics, the Black may disappear, together with the types that a free instinct of beauty may go on signaling as fundamentally recessive and undeserving. (32)

When read in the context of Mexico's colonial period, Vasconcelos could be seen as carrying out what Spanish census takers initially planned for New Spain's population: a disappearance of Blacks and Native Americans altogether. As Patricia Seed notes, the most detailed census taken

in 1811 in Mexico City did not distinguish between *castizos*, *mestizos*, *mulattos*, or racially mixed persons but referred to them all as *castas* instead (577). In a similar manner, Vasconcelos championed a future for Mexico where race did not exist.

Other notable scholars such as Fernando Ortiz and Néstor García Canclini can be seen as creating theories related to Vasconcelos's theory of *mestizaje*. These two theories promote false homogeneity. In his work *Cuban Counterpoints: Tobacco and Sugar* (1940), Fernando Ortiz coined the term "transculturation" and argued that Cubans were a neo cultural people making up the sum of peoples from all corners of the world:

> The Negroes brought with their bodies their souls, but not their institutions nor their implements. They were of different regions, races, languages, cultures, classes, ages, sexes, thrown promiscuously into the slave ships, and socially equalized by the same system of slavery […]. After the Negroes began the influx of Jews, French, Anglo-Saxons, Chinese and peoples from the four quarters of the globe. They were all coming to a new world, all on the way to a more or less rapid process of transculturation. I am of the opinion that the word *transculturation* better expresses the different phases of the process of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture, which is what the English word *acculturation* really implies, but the process also necessarily involves the loss or uprooting of a previous culture, which could be defined as a deculturation. In addition it carries the idea of the consequent creation of a new cultural phenomenon, which could be called neoculturation. (Ortiz 102)

Ortiz's genealogical walk through the waves of people who have voluntarily or involuntarily arrived in Cuba is similar to Vasconcelos's theory of *mestizaje* in that out of many people a supposed homogenous neo cultural people will emerge. As one reads Ortiz's work, it is

important to note the historical context in which his theory emerged. As Robert Whitney notes, "in the 1930's the "Cubanness"—or lack thereof—of the island's population was of great concern to state leaders" (297). Cuba needed immigrants and they especially wanted Spanish immigrants to make their home in Cuba; but they also needed Haitians and West Indian workers to fill up eastern Cuba and tend to the sugar harvest (Whitney 297). How can a cohesive nation emerge out of supposedly opposite peoples? Ortiz's response is that Cubans were a neo cultural people with a new distinct Cuban culture.

In a similar manner, in *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity* (1995), Néstor García Canclini argues that Latin American theories concerning race in the Americas such as *mestizaje*, syncretism and creolization can be thought of as the forerunners of his proposed theory of hybridity. He defines hybridity not as the mixing of races *per se* but the mixing of technologies:

> These terms—mestizaje, syncretism, creolization—continue to be used in a good part of the anthropological and ethnohistorical literature to specify particular, more or less classic, forms of hybridization. But how does one designate fusions between mass media and urban working-class cultures, between the consumer styles of different generations, between local and transnational musics, that take place on the borders and in large cities (but not only there)? The word hybridization seems more ductile for the purpose of naming not only the mixing of ethnic or religious elements but the products of advanced technologies and modern or postmodern social processes. (García Canclini "Introduction")

In essence, García Canclini moves beyond the nation and notes the hybridization that is already occurring at a global scale. As he notes, technology allows for a hybridization that transcends

international borders, age groups, urban and rural residents, and white- and blue-collar workers. Although García Canclini's theory may appear to be inclusive, it is important to keep in mind that his theory of hybridity still borrows from Lamarckism, a branch in the field of eugenics that stresses nurture over nature, and also it does not consider the voluntary/involuntary relationship that transnational communities across various socioeconomic sectors are having with technology.

As García Canclini himself notes, he borrows from Brian Stross's theory of "cycles of hybridization" to describe how societies move from "the discrete to the hybrid, and to new discrete forms" again and again ("Introduction"). García Canclini's arguments is that there is no such thing as cultural purity and that that which appears to be pure is actually a hybrid ("Introduction"). Brian Stross, whom García Canclini borrows from, is himself a champion of Lamarkian eugenics. As Stross states, it is better to focus on hybridizing people culturally rather than genetically because a person's genetic makeup cannot be changed whereas lifestyles can be changed. In essence, Stross stresses that a person's environment (nurture) can shape individuals:

> Cultural hybrids are created through such processes as diffusion (or borrowing), invention, learning, cultural assimilation, and construction, among others. Human institutions or activities that deliver these processes include trade (commerce), warfare (conquest), travel (tourism), education (school), marriage, friendship, ethnography, and other forms of social interaction. All of these promote heterogeneity, thus contributing to the production of hybrids and through them hybridity. (264)

Stross argues that sexual mixing between the races is not the only way to create a hybrid people. Hybrid people are also created through diverse inputs such as school, travel, and commerce. Having access to different viewpoints and being able to travel to other countries and trade with

others also creates hybrids, according to Stross. Similarly to the *científicos* of yore, Stross argues that hybrids can be created through technology.

These critics have of course not gone unchecked by others in academia. As Pedro Palou notes, José Vasconcelos' grand ideas about incorporating the aboriginal Mexican peoples had more to do with making them productive and getting a profit out of them than really creating a unified Mexican family or a sense of *mexicanidad*:

> Vasconcelos en *La raza cósmica*, publicada en 1925, consideraba el mestizaje como salvación, la mezcla pacífica de las razas en una nueva, biológica y culturalmente más fuerte. Si bien esa utopía autoritaria devino discurso y política pública, el origen mismo de la idea de mestizaje representaba una aporía insoluble: incorporar al indígena a la nueva realidad productiva; convertirlo en ciudadano implicaba modernizarlo, hacerlo partícipe del único modo de producción posible para ese liberalismo, el capitalismo industrial. (15)
>
> Vasconcelos in *The Cosmic Race*, published in 1925, considered mestizaje as salvation, the peaceful mixture of races into a new, biologically, and culturally stronger one. Although this authoritarian utopia became discourse and public policy, the very origin of the idea of *mestizaje* represented a difficult roadblock: to incorporate the indigenous into the new productive reality; to convert them into citizens implied modernizing them, making them participants in the only mode of production possible for this liberalism, industrial capitalism.

Talks of *mestizaje* then were aimed at romanticizing the forced mixture of the races. Mexico's aboriginal peoples could only hope to enter modernity by becoming less indigenous and shedding their "backward" ways so that they could enter into the capitalist mainstream and

supposedly better their race and the nation. *Mestizaje* also serves as a gaslighting rhetoric in that it negates racial difference while calling for the "bettering of the race" in the same breath. In this new envisioned nation, all the races are mixed, therefore race supposedly does not exist. Moreover, it is a way to reward those indigenous peoples who move away from their roots. The more they move away from their roots the more "modern" they supposedly become.

Antonio Cornejo Polar also critiques Fernando Ortiz's theory of transculturation, describing it as, "the most sophisticated disguise of the category of *mestizaje*" (761). As for Cornejo Polar's thoughts on *mestizaje*, he argues that *mestizaje* tries to create a false sense of unity:

> What *mestizaje* does is to offer a harmonious image of what is obviously disjointed and confrontational, proposing representations that deep down are only relevant to those for whom it is convenient to imagine our societies as smooth and non-conflictive spaces of coexistence. (761)

In essence, *mestizaje* does not really serve the needs of those it claims to represent but is instead an ideology that soothes those who imagine there is harmony where there is none. One popular adage in Mexico City sums up Mexico's failure to unify the nation, which is "*juntos pero no revueltos*," which literally translates to "together but not mixed."

As Alberto Moreiras notes in his work *The Exhaustion of Difference* (2001), García Canclini's theory of "hybridity" incorporated many of the theories that came before it. As Moreiras argues, "hybridity might in the present come close to becoming, on its performative side, a sort of ideological cover for capitalist reterritorialization—and even a key conceptual instrument for the very process of naturalization of subaltern exclusion" (267). Moreiras's point is that "hybridity," like *mestizaje,* pushes modernity through technology.

These "cycles of hybridity" or *mestizaje* are exactly what Ileana Rodríguez regards as the death blow to Latin American studies in her essay "Postmodern Theory and Cultural Criticism" (2022). As Rodríguez notes, "Latin America suffers from a terminal condition that consists in never reaching up to the "real" modern and is therefore always being defined at best by its mixtures. This is the effect of its colonial and postcolonial condition." (616). In making this comment, Rodríguez is urging her readers to consider that much of postmodern discussion in Latin America is still focused on hybridity. As I have shown in this section, concepts such as *mestizaje*, transculturation, and hybridity all share a common denominator of being defined by their mixture.

But after all, what does this have to do with the prefaces to *Jamás fandango al cielo*? I bring up a brief history of race relations in Latin America precisely because it frames how scholars interpreted the oral, Afro-Mexican folktales they were encountering in the Costa Chica. The prefaces to *Jamás fandango al cielo* reveal how scholars struggled to reconcile Mexico's needs for modernity and the actual existence of a thriving Afro-diasporic culture and people in Mexico.

For this reason, the reader will see that Afro-Mexicans are rhetorically transformed into Black Spaniards and moved away from their African heritage in order to fit into a Eurocentric model of Mexican modernity. For Mexico to successfully move into modernity, the dominant story goes, indigenous subjects must willingly give up claim to their ancestral lands and the African must be erased or whitened.

Mexico's colonial project and goals for reaching modernity have consisted of downplaying their African heritage; and even when African heritage is acknowledged, Afro-Mexican scholarship is defined by its connections to Spain and Europe rather than Africa. These

Eurocentric claims of course rest on the belief that Spain itself has not been influenced by its North African neighbors.

The scholarly white-washing of Mexico's Afro-Mexicans and Jamás fandango al cielo

The idea of a Mexico that is devoid of Blackness is so profound and cemented into the nation that it has even affected how Mexican anthropologists depict the Afro-Mexican subject. The first anthropological work ever conducted on Afro-Mexicans was carried out by Mexican anthropologist, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán. In 1946, he completed the first monograph on Afro descendants in Mexico while he was a doctoral student in African Anthropology at Northwestern University. His work *La población negra de México: Estudio etnohistórico* (The Black Population of Mexico: Ethnographic Study) (1946) proved that New Spain participated in the Atlantic slave trade and that Africans had influenced the customs and practices of indigenous people and Mexican life. Aguirre Beltrán's work came at a time when most Mexicans denied that Africans existed in Mexico and that slavery was once practiced in the country (Green 658). And moreover, it came at a time when influential scholars such as Aimé Césaire and Léon Damas began to examine the cultural production of Blacks in other parts of the African Diaspora.

Unfortunately, just as the world was turning to the study of Afro-Mexicans, Aguirre Beltrán tried to close the doors on Afro-Mexican studies with his work *Cuijla, esbozo etnográfico de un pueblo negro* (Cuijla, Ethnographic Sketch of a Black Village) (1958). In this work, he claimed that Blacks had only left behind their history but that they themselves did not exist like Blacks existed in other Latin American countries:

En aquellos países donde el negro es un fenómeno de viva actualidad, el afro-americanista, al realizar sus investigaciones, puede conformarse con los instrumentos comunes que le ofrece el método y las técnicas antropológicas, sin buscar mayor profundidad que la que suministra la información de las gentes que tiene bajo su directa observación; más en esos países, como México, donde no existe ya el negro como grupo diferenciado, sólo la perspectiva histórica es capaz de proporcionar el panorama exacto e integral […]. Negros hubo en México desde el momento de la Conquista; su número creció cuando el imperialismo español estructuró la explotación de la colonia a base de una sociedad dividida en castas; decreció al advenimiento del híbrido libre que hizo incosteable la mano de obra esclavista y desapareció, por mestizaje, en el correr de la etapa Independiente. (7)

In those countries where the Black is a living phenomenon, the African-Americanist, when carrying out his investigations, can be satisfied with the common instruments that the anthropological method and techniques offer him, without looking for greater depth than that provided by the information of the people he has under his direct observation; but in those countries, such as Mexico, where Blacks no longer exist as a differentiated group, only the historical perspective is capable of providing an exact and integral panorama [...]. There were Blacks in Mexico from the moment of the Conquest; their number increased when Spanish imperialism structured the exploitation of the colony on the basis of a society divided into castes; it decreased with the advent of the free hybrid that made slave labor unaffordable and disappeared, due to crossbreeding, during the Independent stage.

In essence, Aguirre Beltrán argues that Blacks no longer exist in Mexico because they are racially mixed and not truly Black like the Blacks in the United States or in other parts of the Americas. Aguirre Beltrán's negation of Blackness is in some ways similar to Vasconcelos'. Like Vasconcelos, Aguirre Beltrán uses the argument of purity to negate Blackness. There are supposedly no Blacks in Mexico because there are no *pure* Blacks. Despite Aguirre Beltrán's claim that Afro-Mexicans are not truly Black, his work detailed the most intimate parts of Afro-Mexican life such as marriage, death, and courtship practices as well as the roles that men, women, and children played in Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero. Ironically, saying that Blacks did not exist in Mexico seemed to have pushed some researchers to seek out Blacks in Mexico.

For example, in 1989, the same year that *Cuijla* was published, Guillermo Bonfil Batalla launched Our Third Root, a project which sought to challenge *mestizo* Mexico. He denounced Mexican discourses that attempted to construct a homogenous popular culture in Mexico. And he asserted that national homogeneity came at the detriment of indigenous and racial minorities whose languages and way of life were constantly under attack by the nation's imposed concept of a homogenous *mestizo* Mexico (Bonfil Batalla XVII). He saw Mexico as being made up of an "imaginary Mexico," which consisted of the dominant *mestizo* elite, and a *México profundo* (true Mexico), which reflected the real Mexican society and its general population:

> The recent history of Mexico, that of the last five hundred years, is the story of permanent confrontation between those attempting to direct the country toward the path of Western civilization and those […] who resist. The first plan arrived with the European invaders but was not abandoned with independence. The new groups in power, first the creoles and later the mestizos, never renounced the westernization plan […]. Thus, the diverse national visions used to organize Mexican society during different periods since

> independence have all been created within a Western framework. In none of them has the reality of the *México profundo* had a place. Instead, it has been viewed only as a symbol of backwardness and an obstacle to be overcome. (Bonfil Batalla XV)

In his writing, Bonfil Batalla pointed out that Mexico, although independent, still held onto notions of European superiority, which first Spanish colonizers left behind and then the creoles, the children or grandchildren of the Spaniards sent by the King of Spain to rule Mexico, and then the *mestizos*, the combination of Spanish, Black, Indian, or any other ethnicity in Mexico, continued to rule Mexico with notions of European superiority. Those who rose to power consistently visualized for Mexico a racial future like that espoused by European colonizers who had come from Spain.

In line with Bonfil Batalla's philosophy of promoting the true Mexico and highlighting the many vibrant cultures and peoples that made up Mexican society, a team of anthropologists set out to the Costa Chica of Guerrero and compiled a collection of folktales under the title *Jamás fandango al cielo.* In the preface of the collection, Malinali Meza Herrera praises Bonfil Batalla and his commitment to unearthing the real Mexico before detailing the research and methods used to compile *Jamás fandango al cielo* (9).

The goal of *Jamás fandango al cielo* was to move away from the idea of a homogenous, *mestizo* Mexico, but throughout the preface, prologue, and introduction, written by each anthropologist of the project, the notion of a homogenous and Europeanized *mestizo* culture is reinforced rather than contested.

In the preface to the collection, historian and ethnologist, Malinali Meza Herrera asserts that the Afro-Mexican culture is in danger of extinction and that very few Afro-Mexicans can recall any folk stories of the past:

> Al recrear el cuento, el narrador nos lleva a escenas anteriores, cuando la televisión no había hecho su aparición y era común en la Costa, que los pequeños se sentaran acuclillados alrededor de los viejos para escuchar sus historias; las chancas, los duendes, pescados de muchos colores, el Tío Conejo que se burla de todos […]. Hoy, eso ha quedado atrás, muy pocos se acuerdan de los cuentos […] algunos viejos, jóvenes y niños, se acuerdan aun lo que les han contado. (10)
>
> In recreating the story, the narrator takes us back to a previous time, when televisions had not yet appeared and it was common on the Costa Chica, for the little ones to sit squatting around the old people to listen to their stories; the pigeons, the elves, the colorful fish, Uncle Rabbit making fun of everyone [...]. Today, that is behind us, and very few remember the stories [...] some old people, young people and children, still remember what they have been told.

Meza's statement about oral tales being in danger of extinction is contradicted by the fact that several young people and children in the Costa Chica towns of San Nicolás Tolentino, Maldonado, and Huehuetan could recall oral folktales as late as the 1990s (Díaz Pérez 22). Moreover, the people in these towns could recall oral stories of the past despite technological advances such as television sets and radios in their homes (Díaz Pérez 22).

In fact, during my own travels to the Costa Chica of Oaxaca in April 2022, I noticed that the practice of oral storytelling is not dead at all. I had the honor of sitting down and having breakfast with a well-known oral storyteller and verse maker Calé de los versos, which translates to Calé the man of the verses. During our talk, I asked him if he would ever consider writing down his poems and stories for future generations. To which he replied that he is working with a group of researchers who are taking down his stories and transforming them into written form.

But as we talked further it appeared to me that these poems and tales are meant to be told and shared in verbal form. Reading is a solitary experience and the tales and verses he makes are meant to bring the community together. Observing the work of Calé de los versos and other oral storytellers emphasizes that the Costa Chica is an important site for research into orality and the place of oral traditions in the development of the region's literature.

During my research stay in April 2022, I witnessed the power that stories have to bring people together. When Calé began to play his drum and sing stories, a group of children ran out of their homes and gathered around and started dancing to his drumbeat. No parents restrained their children from going to his house to dance. In fact, children called one another to come and dance and exclaimed that Calé was playing his drum. Below I enclose a still shot of the neighborhood children in Corralero, Oaxaca, Mexico dancing while Calé plays his drum and sings in the background. This still shot was taken on April 11, 2022, in Corralero, Oaxaca:

Figure 3: Neighborhood children in Corralero, Oaxaca, Mexico dancing while Calé plays his drum and sings in the background.

Through folklore, Afro-Mexican communities along the Costa Chica have preserved their history and cultural pride. The fact that Costa Chica communities have shared folktales that can be recalled by elders, teens, and children shows that these tales are not in any danger of extinction. Long before researchers begin investigating a written literature coming out of the Costa Chica, the oral traditions that influence the development of this later literature are vibrant in the regions.

For example, established Afro-Mexican writers such as Silva Sandoval Filemón, Abel Emigdio Baños Delgado, and Francisco J. Zárate Arango draw from oral Costa Chica folklore to fill the pages of their poetry and short story collections. Their works demonstrate the long-lasting hold that oral folklore has had on the Afro-Mexican writing community.

Therefore, Meza's statement that Afro-Mexican culture is on the verge of being forgotten or being extinct is simply unfounded. It is perhaps more likely to be remembered precisely because it is so often declared dead because of perceptions of race and nation. Statements in which Afro-Mexicans are romanticized as part of Mexico's dying past only reinforce the hegemony of *mestizaje*. As Christina Sue notes, in an attempt to create a unifying culture, Mexican leaders reclaimed the country's indigenous past and consecrated the nation as being the byproduct of indigenous and Spanish mixture in which Blacks had been absorbed through cultural and racial mixture (16). The idea of a national *mestizo* body swallowing Blacks until they have "disappeared" is neither new nor helpful for Afro-Mexican communities.

Instead of challenging *mestizaje*, the prologue to *Jamás fandango al cielo*, at times, reasserts the notion of a whitened *mestizo* national body in which Blacks have been swallowed up by *mestizaje*. In the prologue to the collection, anthropologist, and ethnologist Enrique Valencia Valencia claims that Blacks do not exist in Mexico the same way that they exist in

other countries such as the United States, the Caribbean, or an area he refers to as "las Antillas" – the West Indies.:

> En México la presencia de la cultura afroamericana no tiene la amplitud ni la integridad que tiene en otros países de América Latina, para no mencionar los Estados Unidos, el Caribe y las Antillas. El caso es que en nuestro país la cultura de origen africano, nuestra "tercera raíz" fue muy pronto absorbida por el proceso de mestizaje y las huellas leves que de ella quedaron son los únicos testimonios actuales. Cómo explicar este hecho, sólo puede ser de objeto de hipótesis. Entre ellas, la fuerte presencia de una población indígena o indomestiza, cuyo peso demográfico fue decisivo para el mestizaje. (13)
>
> The presence of African American culture in Mexico does not have the breadth and integrity that it has in other Latin American countries, not to mention the United States, the Caribbean, and the West Indies. The fact is that in our country the culture of African origin—our "third root"—was very soon absorbed by the process of crossbreeding and the slight traces left of it are the only current testimonies. How to explain this fact? It can only be the subject of hypotheses. Among them, the strong presence of an indigenous or *indomestizo* population, whose demographic weight was decisive for *mestizaje*.

The passage above perfectly illustrates the uneasiness with which Mexican scholars began to understand and depict Mexico's African heritage and the people they encountered in the Costa Chica. In the passage above, Valencia Valencia attempts to downplay the presence of Afro-Mexicans by citing *mestizaje* as the reason that Mexico supposedly has only faint traces of an African heritage left. But as he himself notes, there is no evidence supporting the conclusion that Africans as a whole disappeared from the nation due to racial mixing.

As Bobby Vaughn notes, no other Latin American country has held on as tightly to the concept of a *mestizo* national body as Mexico has. Traditionally, scholars working with Afro diasporic peoples in Latin America and the Caribbean use the common Afro-prefix appended to the nation in question when presenting their research findings, such as *afrocubano*, *afro-brasileiro*, *afroperuano*, *afrocolombiano*, Afro- or African American. Instead of following this tradition, Mexican scholars instead invented the term *afro-mestizo* (Vaughn, "Mexico Negro" 3). As Vaughn notes, the term *afro-mestizo* is unique to Mexico. Whenever the term *afro-mestizo* pops up scholars can be sure that the people discussed are Mexicans of African ancestry. In contrast, the rest of African diaspora scholars and researchers use the Afro-prefix appended to the nation in question. When Afro-Mexicans have tried to assert their African heritage, they are often told that they do not possess enough African heritage to call themselves Black. Once again, the dominant *mestizo* ideology cemented in the 20th century forces all Mexicans to conform to *mestizo* normativity.

Further on in the introduction to *Jamás fandango al cielo*, Valencia Valencia recognizes that the compiled oral tales represent a valuable demonstration of Black life in Mexico, and moreover, he goes on to note that Black Mexicans possess different linguistic patterns that are unique to their region. Nonetheless, Valencia Valencia moves away from the African diaspora by comparing Afro-Mexican tales to European sagas instead of African folktales:

> La colección de cuentos provenientes de la Costa Chica de Guerrero, que la Unidad de Culturas Populares de ese Estado investigó y recopiló, constituye una valiosa muestra de la cultura afromestiza en nuestro país […]. Algunos de estos cuentos tienen clara filiación con las sagas de la cultura occidental […]. El español afromestizo en que se expresa esta narrativa constituye […] el apócope de muchas palabras, especialmente de las formas

> verbales, constituye el conocido esteoreotipo del habla “negra” […] si es que esto puede establecerse […] estableciera claramente las diferencias dialectales del español. (14)
>
> The collection of stories from the Costa Chica of Guerrero, which the Unidad de Culturas Populares of that state investigated and compiled, constitutes a valuable sample of the Afromestizo culture in our country [...]. Some of these stories have clear affiliations with the sagas of Western culture [...]. The Afromestizo Spanish in which this narrative is expressed constitutes [...] the apogee of many words, especially of the verbal forms that constitute the well-known aestheticism of "Black" speech [...] if this can be established [...] it would clearly establish the dialectal differences of Spanish.

Although Afro-Mexican folktales probably have connections to European lore, emphasizing their European origins goes back to what Vaughn has pointed out as uneasiness on the part of Mexican scholars to tie Afro-Mexicans to the broader African diaspora. As Vaughn clearly pointed out, when Mexican Afro diasporic scholars talk about Afro-Mexicans they tend to play up the European heritage of Afro-Mexicans. As can be seen above, Valencia Valencia uses the term “español afro-mestizo” (Spanish Afro-Mestizo) when referring to contemporary Afro-Mexicans.

Moreover, Valencia Valencia attributes the unique *costeño* dialect of the people of the Costa Chica to Spain, when in fact it is part of the linguistic history of the African diaspora in the Americas. As Norma Rosas Mayén notes, during her research trips in Collantes, Oaxaca and Santa María de la Luz Chicometepec in 2004 and 2005, *costeño* Spanish exhibits phonological traits that are in line with other Afrodescendant Spanish speakers throughout the Americas:

> Costeño Spanish exhibits the following phonological processes that are also found in many other Afro-Hispanic language varieties: a) vocalic, consonantal and syllabic

> reductions; b) vowel variation; c) epenthesis; d) consonantal substitution; e) weakness/deletion of the segment /d̪/ in intervocalic and word-final position; f) variable behavior of the segment /s/ especially in word-final position ranging from strong to weak realizations; g) occasional liquid mutation; f) invariable realization of the voiced palatal fricative /ʏ/; and g) word-final nasal velarization. In addition, Costeño Spanish presents a labialized phone [hʷ], an allophonic variant of /f/ (i.e. oficio /ofisyo/ > [o.hʷí.syo] 'occupation', café /kafe/ > [ka.hʷé] 'coffee', familia /familya/ > [hʷa.mí.λya]), which [are] rooted in West African languages. (Rosas Mayén Introduction)

Rosas Mayén's research reveals that *costeños* speak in ways that are in line with other Afro-Hispanic speakers throughout the Americas because their speech patterns come from the same West African linguistic family.

Moreover, my own research in Mexico illuminates that *costeños* are aware that they speak a different dialect and they intentionally and consciously switch dialects when speaking to non-*costeño* people. If researchers hear Afro-Mexicans speaking "perfect" Spanish, Afro-Mexicans are tailoring their tongues to meet their audiences' ears. On August 4, 2022, Hugo Arellanes Antonio shared with me that when he moved to Mexico City from Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero he noticed very quickly that the Spanish he grew up learning and speaking in his hometown was not the same Spanish used in Mexico City. When he spoke in *costeño* Spanish, *chilangos* would consult one another and then quickly conclude that Hugo must not be Mexican because they could not understand his "weird" Spanish accent.[6] They would ask him where he was from and how long he was visiting Mexico. To avoid further discrimination, Hugo shared

[6] Natives to Mexico City.

with me that he switches dialects when he is around non-*costeños* so that he can have one less thing to worry about as a Black Afro-Mexican man navigating Mexico City.

Throughout the collection, the anthropologists and ethnologists for *Jamás fandango al cielo* attempt to incorporate Afro-Mexicans into the larger *mestizo* corpus but they do so at the expense of subsuming difference. For example, later in the introduction, Valencia Valencia argues that Mexico's Afro-descendants, unlike Blacks in other parts of the Americas, quickly assimilated and were absorbed into the national body through *mestizaje* and that therefore they do not have any myths or origin tales like Blacks in other parts of Latin America who resisted assimilation:

> En los cuentos y leyendas a que me he venido refiriendo no es advertible la precedencia del mito. Nuevamente ello tiene que ver con el proceso de mestizaje intenso a que estuvo sometido el grupo afromestizo, lo cual borró-creó-los vestigios y aún la necesidad de las reivindicaciones sobre origen o sobre la legitimidad social y cultural […]. Las lógicas de la esclavitud y el desarraigo tendieron a borrar esas diferencias y sólo entre los grupos numéricamente más fuertes pudieron conservarse […]. Tal es el caso de Haití y Brasil […] en [el cual] las etnias negras resistieron la asimilación. (16)
>
> In the stories and legends to which I have been referring, the precedence of the myth is not obvious. Again, this has to do with the process of intense crossbreeding to which the Afro-Mestizo group was subjected, which erased - I believe - the vestiges and even the need for claims on origin or on social and cultural legitimacy [...]. The logic of slavery and uprooting tended to erase these differences and only among the numerically stronger groups could they be preserved [...]. Such is the case of Haiti and Brazil [...] in which the Black ethnic groups resisted assimilation.

In the passage above, Valencia Valencia once again distances Afro-Mexican folktales and Afro Mestizo language patterns from the history of African languages or Black resistance in the Americas. He claims that even if Africans did come to Mexico with a storytelling tradition, that tradition could not have survived because Africans in Mexico—unlike Africans elsewhere—quickly assimilated into the Mexican national body through *mestizaje*. Statements like these do not consider that Afro-Mexicans were by no means passive and eager to assimilate. Moreover, comments like this overlook the fact that Afro-Mexicans have been resisting colonization and its legacies for centuries.

Only the introduction in the collection *Jamás fandango al cielo* acknowledges Afro-Mexican folklore as oral stories from predominantly oral people. In the final preface to the collection, anthropologist María Cristina Díaz Pérez notes that the folktales in the collection are used to assert a collective identity among the Afro-Mexican people on the Costa Chica of Guerrero:

> Los narradores fueron hombres y mujeres de diferentes edades, niños desde ocho años hasta adultos de más de 80, quienes hicieron gala de una memoria bien ejercitada desde temprana edad. […]. Al terminar una historia indicaban que podían continuar otra, diciendo: "Me meto por un callejón y salgo por otro, ahora quiero […] que me cuenten otro" […]. Los cuentos promueven sentimientos de identidad, autovaloración y moral. (22)
>
> The storytellers were men and women of different ages, children from eight years old to adults over 80, who demonstrated a well-exercised memory from an early age […]. At the end of one story they indicated that they could continue telling more stories by

> saying, “I go down one alley and come out another, now I want […] to be told another” […]. The stories promote feelings of identity, self-worth, and morale.

Díaz Pérez’s contribution to the oral folklore collection was the only one that noted the vast age range of the people who could recite folktales from memory. Through Díaz Pérez’s findings, readers can safely conclude that the Costa Chica folklore tradition is not in any danger of extinction. As Díaz Pérez observes, oral storytelling seems to be an expectation of community members. Whoever hears a tale must reward the storyteller with a tale of his own, continuing an inherited tradition.

The preface, prologue and introduction to *Jamás fandango al cielo* reveal how researchers, at times, grappled with understanding Blackness in a country that has historically denied and suppressed its African heritage. As Vaughn further notes, Our Third Root researchers did indeed bring much needed attention to Mexico’s African heritage and history. They not only compiled *Jamás fandango al cielo* (1993) but also a collection of children’s tales titled *Cállate Burrita Prieta: poética afromestiza* (1993), which translates to Shut Up Little Black Donkey: Afro-Mexican Poetics. Although they brought awareness to Afro-Mexicans’ literary traditions, they did it in a way that heavily underscored *mestizo* Mexico. As Vaughn argues, Afro-Mexicans became the metaphorical root that was swallowed up by *mestizaje*:

> Consistent with nationalist mestizaje ideology, the metaphor of the Third Root conceives of the African “roots” as being the third root alongside both the indigenous and Spanish roots – a variation on the melting pot image. These three roots undergird and give rise to the national tree of a mestizo Mexico. The importance of the roots, as such, lies in their functional role—not in their existence as a people. Rather, their

> importance lies in their providing the raw material to produce mestizo Mexico as the finished product. (“Mexico Negro” 230)

The goal of the Our Third Root project was to emphasize Mexico's African diversity and heritage. But Mexico's African people and culture were continuously portrayed as relics of a past that would fade away in due time. This is what I mean when I say that modernity as it is presented in Mexico is anti-Black. Mexico can only supposedly step into modernity if it disappears its Blacks and modernizes its aboriginal peoples.

Despite the imperfections of the Our Third project, its participants did go out into the field and sit down and listen to Afro-Mexicans and their stories. This dissertation would not have been possible without their efforts. In life as in research there is always room for improvement. In the next section, I move away from *mestizo* normative readings of Afro-Mexican folklore and instead focus on the West and Central African origins of Afro-Mexicans’ Uncle Rabbit tales.

Section IV: West and Central African Storytelling Traditions in Afro-Mexican Folklore

I examine the two trickster rabbit stories in *Jamás fandango al cielo* alongside their West or Central African counterparts. To date, the only scholar to explore these tales comparatively is Paulette Ramsay. In her work, she compares Mexico’s trickster Uncle Rabbit to the West African trickster Anancy from the Asante people of Ghana. Moreover, she shows how Uncle Rabbit’s adversaries—the crocodile, coyote, and lion—are allegories of the Spanish colonizer. I take Ramsay’s analysis of these stories a step further. I examine Afro-Mexican folktales in comparison to their West or Central African counterpart. I examine where the similarities stop to garner a sense of why these tales have survived into the post-colonial period. It’s worth noting

that the existence of the tales in Guerrero's Costa Chica are not just an indicator of storytelling practices but evidence of a historical memory that stretches back to West and Central African traditional precolonial storytelling traditions.

For my sample study, I will be examining two trickster rabbit stories in the collection: "El Lagarto y El Conejo" and "El Conejo, El Coyote y Jamás fandango al cielo." I chose these two stories because they are emblematic of the instructional nature of folklore in the Costa Chica region. As María Cristina Díaz Pérez notes, the title of the collection *Jamás fandango al cielo* is taken from a folktale of the same name. The researchers chose to name the collection *Jamás fandango al cielo* because the function of folktales in the Costa Chica is to portray proper and improper behavior; in this sense, the tales are both entertaining and educational (Díaz Pérez 22). Improper behavior means selling out one's kinfolk to protect one's own individual safety and proper behavior means sacrificing personal gain so that the collective can live in peace. In the tale "El Conejo, El Coyote y Jamás fandango al cielo," a frightened tortoise sells out her *compadre* Uncle Rabbit and conspires against him. Uncle Rabbit, upon learning that his *comadre* sold him out to a crocodile, devises a plan to get back at her:

- ¡Ah! Comadre puta me entregó con el lagarto, e´tá bien.

[…]

Viene el conejo y que se encuentra con la´guila, también era compadre de´ella.

Luego que la vio la saludo.

- Bueno´día comadrita águila

- Bueno´ dia´compadre conejo, ¿qué tal con sus mañas que carga u´te´?

- Pue´me ando defendiendo comadrita.

Luego dice:

-Comadrita, nunca le he pedido un favor, pero óra si le vo´a pedir uno.

-U´té dirá compadre

-Mire, la tortuga me hizo una traición, me entregó con el lagarto que ya mero me comía.

-¿Qué quiere que le haga a la tortuga?

-Que se la coma. (55)

- Ugh! *comadre*, you bitch. You handed me over to the crocodile. That's alright.

[...]

The rabbit comes and meets the eagle, she was also his friend.

After he saw her, he greeted her.

-Good morning, *comadrita* eagle.

-Good morning, my rabbit friend, how are you doing with your tricks?

-I'm defending myself, *comadrita*.

Then he says:

-*Comadrita*, I've never asked you for a favor, but now I'm going to ask you for one.

-You tell me *compadre*

-Look, the turtle betrayed me, she handed me over to the crocodile and he almost ate me.

-What do you want me to do to the turtle?

-Eat it.

After this exchange, Uncle Rabbit and the eagle devise a plan to bring the turtle down. Once the eagle spots the turtle, she dances and pretends to be rehearsing for a *fandango* party in the sky. The eagle invites the turtle to attend the party, and as they ascend high into the sky, the eagle drops the tortoise onto a flat rock, which causes the turtle's shell to crack, and then devours the turtle's body. Before crashing to her death, the turtle screams out "Jamás iré a un fandango al

cielo…jamás iré a un fandango al cielo" (54), which means I will never go to a *fandango* in the sky. Through this tale, the reader is reminded that those who conspire to bring harm to members of the community can expect to be isolated and even killed for their treachery. The fact that the eagle was so eager to comply with Uncle Rabbit once again shows his high rank among the animals.

The term *fandango* can trace its origins back to Portugal and Spain. And in turn, as Christopher Paetzold argues, the *fandango* is influenced by North Africa and the Arabic world that transverses Spanish Andalucian society (207). Even with the title of this one Afro-Mexican folktale, researchers can begin to see how North African, Arabic, and European traditions are part of Afro-Mexican folklore. Even the language in which the tales are told (Spanish) speaks to the story of colonialism in the Americas, but the form and import of the stories attest to origins that are pre-colonial and African.

The tales that will be examined fall into the folktale genre of orature and *tatsuniya* stories. As Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o points out, orature includes the oral expression of an art form that takes for granted that animals and humans exist on the same playing field. Humans cannot be above plants or other animals because they also depend on the soil, water, air, and sun for their survival. And in orature, an animal taking on human characteristics and humans reaching out to animals for help is not the stuff of make-believe but rather a matter of fact (Wa Thiong' 5). It is accepted that humans and animals depend on the same earth to survive. As conceptualized by Wa'thiong'o, orature as an art erases the hierarchy between animals and humans. So, it is fitting that this anti-hierarchical art form, whether it is so named in various locations, is common in Costa Chica folklore. Moreover, the tales analyzed below share similarities with *tatsuniya* stories found throughout Central and West Africa. As Christen notes, "the majority of *tatsuniya*

tales are set in the bush and portray other animals with human characteristics. The Islamic morals tacked onto the endings of these stories show the effects of Muslim contact" (Christen 59). In essence, the presence of Muslim and Spanish elements in these tales does not mean that they are purely Muslim or Spanish tales. These tales are best read as cultural and historical artefacts that depict the contact that Africans in the diaspora are having with other peoples and religions, or in the case of religion, that they may have had before leaving the African continent.

Story I: "The Hunterman and the Crocodile" and "*El Lagarto y El Conejo*"

In the Afro-Mexican tale "*El Lagarto y El Conejo*" (The Alligator and the Rabbit), a crocodile waits in the river for a rabbit that has evaded him before. This time the alligator complains to the rabbit of a toothache and begs the rabbit to please take out of his mouth the thorn that has been hurting him all day. After much persuasion, the rabbit agrees to help the crocodile. Once the rabbit comes close, the crocodile grabs the rabbit's foot with his teeth and refuses to let go. Upon seeing that he has been tricked, the rabbit devises a plan to free himself. First, he admits that he deserves to be eaten. And then, he instructs the alligator on how he ought to be seasoned and prepared to taste best. And at the end, the rabbit successfully breaks free from the weak *yunca* (spice) vines that he instructed the alligator to tie him with.

The Afro-Mexican folktale "*El Lagarto y El Conejo*," shows similarities to the Mali tale "The Hunterman and the Crocodile" transcribed by Baba Wagué Diakité in his work *The Hunterman and the Crocodile: A West African Folktale* (1997). In the Mali tale, Bamba, the crocodile, and his family go on a pilgrimage to Mecca. They travel a great distance but their food and water supplies diminish and they take shelter under a baobab tree to cool off. Upon seeing a

group of crocodiles so far from the river, Donso, the hunter, asks them what brought them so far away from home. Bamba replies that they left their home with good intentions and he asks Donso if he can please take them back to the river. Donso refuses and states that crocodiles are known to eat humans but Bamba promises that he will not eat him. Yet when they reach the river, Bamba decides that he would like to eat Donso after all. Seeing this, Donso reaches out to the animals passing by and asks them if he deserves to die. The cow stresses that all Donso's people do is take milk from her and slaughter her children and then concludes by saying that Donso deserves to die. Next, a horse passes by to drink water and Donso asks the horse if he deserves to die. The horse replies that men are weak and ungrateful. The horse narrates how he spent his whole life plowing and carrying big loads on his back and was only beaten despite trying his best. The horse then ends his speech by saying that Donso deserves to die. Then a chicken comes by and supports Donso's death and narrates how men constantly steal her eggs and feast on the bodies of her children. A quiet mango tree by the river observed all of this and added that men are selfish and that Donso deserved to die. As the mango tree was speaking, a rabbit came up and Donso immediately turned to the rabbit for help. When Donso asked the rabbit if he deserved to be eaten, the rabbit asked Donso how he had gotten into the river. After learning that the crocodiles lured Donso into the river, the rabbit devised a plan to get Donso out. The rabbit proclaimed that he would not believe Bamba's tall tale until he saw it with his own eyes. So Bamba and his family stacked themselves on top of each other and Donso tied them up again and balanced them on his head. Then the rabbit told Donso to throw a feast with the bodies of the crocodiles. But, upon arriving to his village, Donso found out that his wife was gravely ill and that the only thing that could cure her were (ironically) crocodile tears. Donso promised to free Bamba and his family if they gave him their tears. Upon hearing this, the crocodiles shed

tears of joy. Donso collected the tears in his drinking gourd and left to cure his wife. Afterwards, Donso reflected on everything the animals told him. And from then on, he instructed others to live in harmony with all living beings.

After being threatened with life or death, Donso experienced for a brief period what it is like to be the prey. And moreover, he briefly experienced what it could be like to lose someone he loves. Donso experienced the helplessness and pain that other animals and beings, who refused to help him in his time of need, experienced all along. Afterwards, he took these teachings to instruct everyone else around him and he became the staunchest advocate for animals and the environment. In this sense, although the animals were cruel to Donso, their cruelty was a means to an end. Through cruelty, they achieved peace for the collective. As Karl Kerenyi notes, the role of the trickster is to create disorder out of the established hierarchical order. Only by creating disorder can the trickster create an experience that is not permitted (185). Only by creating an experience that seems unfathomable can a vision of an alternative world be achieved. What this means is that the trickster rabbit and his friends had to create a world in which the hunter was the prey so that Donso and his people could develop empathy for non-human beings.

While the trickster rabbit in Donso's tale acts the way he does to achieve a higher state of peace for the collective, the rabbit in "*El Lagarto y El Conejo*" does not have the luxury to save others when he can barely save himself. In her analysis of "*El Lagarto y El Conejo*," Paulette Ramsay argues that the alligator "represents the European need to devour the bodies and lives of enslaved Africans" ("Establishing an Independent Identity" 10). And indeed, European colonists were invested in getting the maximum amount of labor and use out of enslaved Africans, whom they saw as disposable. But the tale does not just depict the colonists' desire to consume African

flesh. It also shows the transformation of the trickster rabbit. In the Mali tale, the rabbit looks out for the needs of the collective and he is surrounded by friends—a cow, horse, chicken, and mango tree—that help him execute his plan. But in the Afro-Mexican tale, there is no hunter man to punish and teach, and the rabbit is chiefly preoccupied with survival. The Afro-Mexican tale shows that the rabbit uses trickery not to achieve something for the greater good but to merely survive in a world where he is constantly the one being cheated.

Story II: "Spider discovers the wax girl" & "El Conejo, El Coyote y Jamás Fandango Al Cielo"

The Afro-Mexican folktale "El Conejo, El Coyote y Jamás Fandango Al Cielo" shows similarities to "Spider discovers the wax girl" from Sierra Leone, which was compiled and published by Florence M. Cronise and Henry W. Ward in *Cunnie Rabbit, Mr. Spider, and Other Beef: West African Folktales* (1903).

In the Afro-Mexican folktale "*El Conejo, El Coyote y Jamás Fandango Al Cielo*," the tale begins with a wealthy woman complaining to her neighbors that a rabbit keeps breaking into her chili garden. One day the woman gets fed up with the rabbit's ransacking and she goes around asking for advice on how to catch it. Someone tells her to build a baby out of wax. So, she makes a wax baby figure and places it at the entrance of her garden. Later that day, the rabbit bids the wax baby a good evening but the baby does not respond. Feeling slighted, the rabbit hits the baby and gets stuck. The next morning, the woman finds the rabbit fastened to the wax baby and orders her child servant to watch over it while she fetches firewood.

While the woman is away, the coyote stops by and laughs at the rabbit and the rabbit tells the coyote that he is trapped in the box because a wealthy woman is forcing him to marry the

pretty servant girl next to him. The coyote then offers to take the rabbit's place and begins making advances on the little girl. When the woman returns, the girl tells her mistress everything that has happened, and the woman throws the coyote into a pot of boiling water. Afterwards, the coyote vows to get even with the Rabbit but he is outsmarted every time. The Rabbit runs the coyote through a series of traps before burning him alive and then turning his cooked carcass into *tamales* to sell.

In a similar manner, in "Spider discovers the wax girl," from Sierra Leone, the Spider is upset that a famine has taken over the land and he comes up with a plan to get as much food for himself as possible. The Spider tells his wife to bury him next to the farmhouse when he dies. The next day, Mrs. Spider finds her husband Mr. Spider dead and she calls on all the animals and tells them that her husband's last wish was to be buried next to the farmhouse where all of the animals store their food. Once his funeral is over, the Spider sneaks into the farmhouse and eats all the food. He keeps doing this every day. The animals grow worried and seek out a man to advise them. The man tells them to build a wax girl and leave it in the farmhouse. The next day, the animals store their food as usual and leave behind a girl made out of wax. The Spider emerges as always and upon seeing the girl he orders her to cook for him. The wax girl does not respond and the Spider hits her until he's completely fastened to her wax body. The next day the animals discover that Spider has been eating the food and they beat him until he's flat. And that's why the Spider has a flat shape to this day.

The existence of these tales in the Costa Chica directly connects the region to Africa and the African diaspora. A variation on these tales exists among African peoples throughout the Caribbean, in Canada and, of course, within Africa. *Mestizo* analysis notwithstanding, these tales directly link the Costa Chica to the cultures of Africa and the African diaspora.

In both tales, the tricksters must deal with food insecurity, but they meet their needs in totally different ways. In the Afro-Mexican tale, the rabbit steals from people who can afford to do without. He steals from a wealthy woman whose wealth is showcased by her excess of land and her indentured child servant. To put it bluntly, the woman grows food for fun on her land when others have to resort to stealing just to get a meal. On the other hand, Mr. Spider steals from his own community and thus must be punished at the end for his anti-collective values.

One can argue that Mr. Spider may have just been pointing out an inequality within the society, but ultimately, he is punished because at some point in the story he goes beyond fulfilling his hunger, which is not a crime, and becomes greedy. As Nataša Valić shows, the African continent has experienced difficult periods of food shortage throughout time, and tales where animals steal food to survive can be read as tales of self-preservation in a continent whose resources are distributed unequally (133). It is interesting to note that the mere stealing of food is not what leads to the Spider's demise. Ultimately, he is caught because his actions go beyond survival and become sexist and exploitative. Upon seeing the wax girl, he orders her to cook stolen food and to serve him. The Spider invokes his rights as a male to exploit the girl and his *macho* pride is what ultimately leads to his demise. The story suggests that there is nothing inherently wrong in stealing food when one is hungry. In fact, Muslims, Christians, and Jews are all required by their religion to feed those who are hungry but one should not go overboard and expect to be served stolen food on a silver platter either. Moreover, it is important to note the form of the tale. The didactic intent of the tale is wrapped up in humor so that in the telling, laughter is constant. When it comes to didactic tales, *costeño* storytellers often employ humor to get serious messages across.

In a similar manner, the Afro-Mexican rabbit conveys the same message as "Spider discovers the wax girl," but he does so in a different way. In her analysis of "The Rabbit, The Coyote, and Never Party in the Sky," Paulette Ramsay argues that the Rabbit represents the ingenious Afro-Mexican people who have for centuries circumvented obstacles which were created to erase them from Mexican society, and moreover, she argues that the tale itself is a parody of the colonists, who are dependent on colonized subjects for their livelihood ("Establishing an Independent Identity" 11). Indeed, the coyote and rabbit's relationship show how the coyote, who represents the colonizer, depends on the rabbit, the colonized subject, for his daily bread. The coyote's laziness and refusal to hunt for himself allow the rabbit to lead the coyote through a series of traps that lead to his demise.

From the beginning of the tale, it is evident that the coyote spends his days following the rabbit around to cash in on whatever goods the rabbit has found for himself. The coyote's roaming around the wealthy woman's house does not seem to be a mere coincidence. Once the rabbit is caught, he knows that his salvation will come soon because the coyote is always a few steps behind him. Once the rabbit is caught and entrapped in the woman's house, he only needs to look out the window to see the coyote wandering about. The rabbit then uses the coyote's lustfulness for little girls to hatch up a plan to escape from the wealthy woman's house. The pattern of using the coyote's vices to entrap him is seen throughout the tale. In this folktale alone, the rabbit fools the coyote a total of seven times. To fool the coyote, the rabbit entraps him with free food or scares him with superstitious tales or grants him access to underage girls. By the time the coyote is burned to death he proves his lecherous, lazy, and cowardly nature. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the coyote's death is not just plotted by the rabbit alone but also by several members of the community.

The trickster rabbit in "The Rabbit, The Coyote, and Never Party in the Sky" plays the role of the teacher, sage, and mediator, and ultimately, he decides the fate of his adversaries. The rabbit's adversaries represent anti-collective values. The coyote, who is the colonist, is "friendly" with the rabbit so long as he can benefit from the relationship. The rabbit's tale can be read as a warning. In this tale, all of the people who betray the community die. Thus "The Rabbit, The Coyote, and Never Party in the Sky" represents not only a fusion of West and Central African storytelling traditions but also new values and ways of thinking and regulating the community that emerged in the Costa Chica so that everyone could survive and live without fear of one another. As will be seen in the next chapter, it is primarily the Costa Chica's collective values that have allowed them to fend off the brutal police state.

Summary

In the first and second sections of this chapter, I examined the origins of Mexico's Afro-Mexican people and the origins of the trickster rabbit and traced his journey throughout Africa, the U.S. South, and Mexico. I argued that the trickster hare may have been born in Central Africa among the Hausa people but his travels throughout West Africa, the U.S South, and Mexico show that the hare will be present and shapeshift whenever and wherever afro diasporic people need folktales to survive. After all, the *tatsuniya* genre, which the trickster hare tales fall under, is meant to encourage people to keep resisting oppressive regimes. Trickster rabbit tales are tales of resistance. So long as Afro-Mexicans are dealt injustice, these tales will remain. They are not part of a dying oral folklore tradition. These tales belong to an Afro diasporic people, sharing the cultures and experiences of African peoples in Mexico.

In the third section, I argued that Afro-Mexican folklore has been analyzed as a blend of indigenous and Spanish European folklore because Black identity in Mexico has been ignored in favor of a *mestizo* Mexico ideology. The ideology of *mestizo* Mexico rose to prominence in the 20th century. I demonstrated how the ideological erasure of Mexico's African roots shows up in the prefaces of *Jamás fandango al cielo* (1993). While analyzing the preface, prologue, and introduction, I pointed out how they tended to echo the 20th century ideological racial cleansing projects for Mexico's Blacks and Native Americans. It is true that indigenous Mexicans have been much more part of the national narrative than Black Mexicans, but their glorious past is symbolically exalted. As Bonfil Batalla notes, there may be a museum there or a pyramid over there but Mexico's indigeneity is seen as part of the past:

> Every schoolchild knows something about the precolonial world. The great archaeological monuments stand as national symbols. There is a circumstantial pride in a past that is somehow assumed to be glorious, but that is experienced as something dead, a matter for specialists and an irresistible attraction for tourists. Above all, it is assumed to be something apart from ourselves, something that happened long ago in the same place where we, the Mexicans, live today. The only connection is based on the fact of them and us occupying the same territory, but in different time periods. (3)

In others words, the Native American Mexican is still fetishized. Their cultures are believed to have been glorious, but in order for a cohesive Mexican family to develop, these distinct tribal differences must disappear. The making of *mexicanidad* also calls for a homogenization of the Mexican people.

Of course, Bonfil Batalla was writing in 1987. What about now? Have conditions for Mexico's Native American people changed? As David Dalton notes, *indigenistas*, a group of

scholars who sought to incorporate the aboriginal and celebrate Mexico's indigenous heritage, and *hispanistas*, a group of scholars who saw Spanish European culture as the foundation of present-day Mexican society, both agreed that the Native American had to be "redeemed" for the nation to move forward:

> *Hispanistas* and *indigenistas* generally agreed that the state had to incorporate indigenous Mexico through mestizaje, but they differed on how (and to what degree) they should acknowledge the country's indigenous heritage. Despite their differences, both movements framed the process of incorporating the Amerindian as a strategy for "redeeming" the nation and improving its culture and quality of life. Mestizaje—whether *hispanista* or *indigenista*—thus provided a strategy for culturally and genetically homogenizing the populace. As writers and artists defined and taught the ways in which the Amerindian could assimilate to modernity, they played an essential role in negotiating race in society. (11)

In essence, whether scholars believed that Spain or Native American cultures were the basis for present-day Mexico, the Native American still needed to be redeemed to fit into and step into modernity.

As Rick López notes in his work *Crafting Mexico: Intellectuals, Artisans, and the State after the Revolution* (2010), after the Mexican Revolution indigenous peoples were promised a future in the modern Mexican state, and this promise was fulfilled by bringing the indigenous subject into the fold of capitalism through the commercialization of their *artesanales,* which are handicrafts such as necklaces, bowls, earrings, paintings and clothing (154). So the indigenous subject was accepted and their cultures were and continue to be capitalized on.

In the fourth section, I examined three trickster rabbit stories from the Costa Chica and compared them to similar stories that can be found throughout West and Central Africa. It is important to note that many of these animal tales are told in various ways throughout the African diaspora in the Americas. The trickster rabbit tales I have examined showcase how Afro-Mexicans have taken their West and Central African storytelling traditions and remodeled their folktales to fit their new environment.

In the next chapter, I explore how Afro-Mexican writers and performers add another dimension to Mexico's story that goes beyond the standard one of *mestizo* Mexico. I analyze *versos*, poetry, and ballads from the Costa Chica of Oaxaca and argue that these forms of expression resist and challenge traditional theories such as *mestizaje*, transculturation, and hybridity, which have been used to read Afro-Mexican works through a lens that ultimately ignores the African influence in Afro-Mexican productions.

Chapter Two: Connecting Afro-Mexican Poetry, Ballads & *Versos* from the Costa Chica to the African Diaspora in the Americas

> When I was born, Mamágrande Locha inspected my buttocks looking for the dark blotch, the sign of indio, or worse, of mulatto blood —from "La Prieta" by Gloria Anzaldúa

As Gloria Anzaldúa notes in her essay "La Prieta" in *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), Mexico's African history and heritage in the Mexican Diaspora and Mexico is one that has historically been hidden and deemed a shameful heritage. Mexico's African heritage is akin to what Henry Louis Gates Jr. calls "the Black grandma in the closet" (66). It is a heritage that is vital and integral to Mexican identity but kept hidden. As I have stated in the previous chapter, *mestizaje* largely depended on bringing aboriginals into the fold of capitalism and disappearing the Afro-Mexican.

In this chapter, I move beyond the mostly anthropological readings of Afro-Mexican folklore and analyze Costa Chica culture itself and how its present state disproves scholars such as Malinali Meza Herrera and Enrique Valencia Valencia, discussed in the first chapter, who believed that Afro-Mexicans would lose their oral storytelling traditions in the future.

Instead of leaning on *mestizaje* or hybridity, I turn to Antonio Cornejo Polar's call to read ethnic literatures from the inside out. As Cornejo Polar noted, he was "enormously interested in the attempt to investigate certain ethnic literatures using the forms of knowledge inherent to those same ethnicities" (762). I doubt that Cornejo Polar was referring to Afro-Mexicans when he wrote these words, but his ideas are still useful for this dissertation. I analyze *versos*, poetry,

and ballads from the Costa Chica of Oaxaca from the inside out. That is, I examine them alongside other Afro diasporic productions and traditions in the Americas so that readers can see that Afro-Mexican productions share and have commonalities with other Afro diasporic productions in the Americas.

This chapter is organized around three sections. In the first section, I demonstrate how *corridos* (ballads) in the Costa Chica are in line with Afrodiasporic resistant practices. By being their own storytellers, *costeños* are able to take back their narratives and tell their side of the story in a nation that has historically downplayed its African heritage. In section two, I argue that the practice of *versear* provides *costeña* women with an avenue of self-expression and way to talk back in a *costeño* community where the male voice is prized. This practice of "reading" or *versear*, as it is called in the Costa Chica, is in line with other forms of nonviolent expression among other subaltern, double marginalized communities, primarily Black LGBTQ communities in the United States. In the third section, I examine how the image of the maroon (*cimarrona*) mother clashes with notions of a *mestizo* Mexico and ties the Costa Chica to the greater African diaspora in the Americas.

For my methodology, I analyze *corridos* from the Costa Chica of Guerrero and Oaxaca as well as poetry and *versos* from *Alma cimarrona: versos costeños y poesía regional* (1999). *Alma cimarrona* is a compilation of *versos* and poetry collected by Angustia Torres Díaz and Israel Reyes Larrea from the Costa Chica of Guerrero and Oaxaca. In addition to *corridos*, *versos*, and poetry, I rely on original empirical research and field notes from my research trips in the Costa Chica of Guerrero and Oaxaca from 2022 to 2023 and Oaxaca City, Oaxaca and Cuernavaca, Morelos in 2022.

Alma Cimarrona shows that Afro-Mexicans are more than capable of speaking for themselves and representing themselves, and moreover, it is a collection written and compiled by Afro-Mexican people for Afro-Mexican people and anyone interested in Afro-Mexican literature and poetry. The *corridos* featured in this chapter showcase how *costeños* continue forming community bonds and resisting oppressive police violence and negotiating colonial gender roles in their hometowns. The collections examined in this chapter get at the crux of what Claudio Lomnitz calls "silent Mexico," which consists of communities who have often not been allowed to have a public voice.

In his work *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico* (2001), Lomnitz argues that more often than not politicians and intellectuals who are not part of the communities they are speaking for claim to know what is best; when in reality, marginalized communities that make up "silent Mexico" have a voice that is too often suppressed or distorted (286). By analyzing works and collections written and overseen by Afro-Mexican scholars, I highlight the voices of Afro-Mexican scholars and writers in the Costa Chica who have often been spoken for and not given a chance to tell their own stories.

Section I: The Costa Chica Ballad & the Trinidadian Calypso

In this section, I outline the role of the ballad composer in the Costa Chica and I compare the Costa Chica *corrido* to the Trinidadian calypso, which is also a resistant music genre.

The Role of the Ballad Composer in the Costa Chica Community

In the late 1980s and first half of the 1990s, John H. McDowell traveled to the Costa Chica and met and interviewed singer-songwriters of *corridos* (ballads) to understand the interconnected nature between violence and ballad composing in *costeño corridos*. In his analysis of the ballad tradition, he found that the *corridistas* (singer-songwriters) he interviewed and broke bread with were composing ballads that held the Costa Chica community together in a complex web. These *corridistas* mediated conflict between rivaling families and kept the community in harmony through ballads. A composer had done his job well when he could dissuade warring families and gangs from further bloodshed. As McDowell notes, in the Costa Chica, the *corrido* serves as a therapeutic relief for the community:

> Corrido performances are able to trigger a cathartic release, evident in the sometimes dramatic responses observed in their audiences. I have already recounted a corrido evening in Cruz Grande marked by ecstatic shouts of approval from the audience, shouts asserting a fierce pride in local identity: "¡Así es la Costa, puro gallo!" (That's how it is on the coast, nothing but fighting cocks!) […] *corridos* no doubt help people transmute their feelings of sadness and anger. (*Poetry and Violence* 174)

In the Costa Chica, the word *gallo* is a word of praise. To be a *gallo* means to be a man of one's word and to defend one's honor even to the death. In Costa Chica *corridos* both the slayer and slain are celebrated as fighting cocks that gave it their all until the end. The winning cock lived to fight another day and the slayed cock died defending his (usually male) honor. One notes here the valorizing of the male image – the triumphant fighting cock.

Although the goal of the composer is to mediate conflict within the Costa Chica, McDowell notes that the composer is not a pacifist who attempts to dissuade the community from engaging in violence at all costs. Rather, the idea promoted is that there are times when it is

in the community's best interest to engage in violence and self-defense. In his analysis of Mexican *corridos,* McDowell points out that in Costa Chica *corridos* violence is depicted and understood as a healthy and necessary response to betrayal:

> Wicked men and women in the world of the corrido initiate violence for personal gain or for mere caprice, but the hero typically acts to avenge the death of a close relative, friend, or ally. The archetype is the man who seeks revenge for the death of his brother. The *corridos* encourage a positive response to such actions, which are characterized as bold, decisive, justified, and even necessary. In many Costa Chica *corridos*, the hero is a wronged man bent on exacting revenge for mistreatment he or his family has received at the hands of enemies. These heroes resort to violence in the absence of conventional systems of justice. (*Poetry and Violence* 18)

As McDowell observes, *corridistas* mediate the violence in the community and act as a proxy justice system where there isn't an effective official system. The Costa Chica composer, like the trickster rabbit seen in the previous chapter, mediates violence and uses it for the greater good and well-being of the collective when he can. There are traitors such as the *coyote*, as seen in chapter one, who need to die because they disturb the collective's well-being, but violence for violence's sake or violence that is carried out for the sole reason of taking advantage of someone is frowned upon in *corridos* as it is in folklore.

A Site to Air Out One's Grievances: the Calypso and Costeño Corrido, a Resistant Genre

West and Central Africans already had a tradition of male storytelling and singing largely held by *griots* (male storytellers) and *griottes* (female storytellers) before entering the "New

World." Enslaved male *griots* retained their public speaking position in the patriarchal lands they were forcefully sent to such as Trinidad and Tobago and Mexico. The revamping of the *griot* can be seen in the calypso of Trinidad and Tobago and the *costeño corrido* of the Costa Chica.

As Thomas Hale noted in his studies of the griots of the 20th century, the role of the griot is not just to tell a story but to analyze it and bring the community to a higher state of consciousness:

> The difference between tales that can be told by anyone in the evening and those told by griots is that these professional artisans of the word possess a slightly different world view. Their stories may reflect […] the perspectives of those in power, because griots, more than any other members of society, are keenly sensitive to social differences stemming from birth, deed, or misfortune. (126)

As Hale noted, what distinguishes *griots* from amateur storytellers is that they possess a greater understanding of unequal power relations in society and they can pass on this knowledge through their stories. Moreover, they possess a feel for the community, a feeling that they as master storytellers can translate into song and make understandable for everyone.

The Costeño Corrido

An example of how ballad composers use their storytelling abilities to heal the community can be seen in Filemón Silva Sandoval's collection of ballads *Lej voy a cantá un corrido, Costa Chica: cuentos de la Negrada, la raíz olvidada* (2015). On one evening in August 2022 in Cuernavaca, Morelos, Filemón Silva Sandoval, an Afro-Mexican short story writer and ballad composer from Rio Grande, Oaxaca, shared with me that he wrote "Lej voy a canta un

corrido" for his ballad collection of the same title in order to honor a friend of his who was murdered by a corrupt police officer. In his ballad, Silva Sandoval depicts how the police officers in the Costa Chica are much more preoccupied with spreading terror throughout the region than protecting citizens. He wrote this ballad to honor his slain friend and to heal the community from a violent murder they were forced to witness.

In the ballad "Lej voy a canta un corrido," a police officer known as El Güero Yayo (The Lightskinned Yayo) is tasked with arresting cattle raiders throughout the Costa Chica region. Yayo is beloved by the elite and scorned by the working-class population. One day, Yayo steals a pair of sunglasses from a newcomer in the region named Atenógenes, and once Atenógenes realizes that his sunglasses have been stolen, he demands that Yayo return his sunglasses. In response, Yayo pistol whips Atenógenes and kicks him in the head so hard that he dies.

Atenógenes's wife Hildegarda finds out that her husband has been murdered at the local canteen and she immediately runs to her *comprade* Mingo to ask for help. Atenógenes' best friend Mingo tracks down Yayo and kills him during a machete duel. Yayo, who is of course inept with a machete, quickly dies at the hands of the laborer Mingo who has grown up wielding the machete his whole life. After killing Yayo, in a fair duel, Mingo flees the Costa Chica because he knows that Yayo's precinct will soon come after him to avenge Yayo's death. In this mixture of short story and ballad, Yayo's death becomes increasingly justified to the reader and listener, who are informed that Yayo not only routinely robbed poor, defenseless civilians but also threatened *costeña* women in order to receive sexual favors from them. Because Yayo is depicted as an enemy to the *costeño* collective, Yayo's death comes to be understood as justified and Mingo's actions as noble and appropriate because he was avenging a friend.

Like West African griots, *corridistas* from the Costa Chica also champion the cause of the socially and politically powerless. This oral literature thus serves a very practical function. The verses' form and structure appeal to the imagination, and the content often critiques power structures.

The critique of these power structures can even be seen in the weaponry of choice that is used to defeat Yayo, the agent of the state. Mingo avenges his friend's death by wielding a machete rather than picking up a gun and firing back with bullets. In this small scene, one can see a microcosm of what Guillermo Bonfil Batalla calls the continuous clash between "México profundo" and "imaginary Mexico." As Bonfil Batalla notes, "México profundo" and "imaginary Mexico" are constantly at war because what is being asked of marginalized Mexicans is their complete demise so that a future for a modern, foreign Mexico can emerge:

> It is always a substitution project. The future is somewhere else, anyplace other than here, in this concrete, daily reality. Thus, the task of constructing a national culture consists of imposing a distant, foreign model, which in itself will eliminate cultural diversity and achieve unity through the suppression of what already exists. In this way of thinking about things, the majority of Mexicans have a future only on the condition that they stop being themselves. (65)

In this way, Mexico's substitution gives way to a homogenous Mexico where the marginalized have become transformed and adopted Western practices so that they too can be part of modern Mexico. Mingo's picking up of a machete and killing Yayo can be interpreted as a triumph of the "non-modern" Mexico over "modern" Mexico, and moreover, the story forces the reader to question if modernity is something that Mexico really ought to aspire to achieve, for the characters in the ballad are afraid of police forces and are constantly fighting back against

corrupt police officers whose sole purpose is to protect the wealth of the elite. The state of modernity is depicted as a state of war rather than a peaceful state that ought to be attained.

According to Silva Sandoval, he felt compelled to write his short story-ballad because everyone knew that Yayo, a pseudonym, was a corrupt police officer. He was being lauded as a hero who was slain in battle instead of as a rapist and coward who finally got what he deserved. Because Silva Sandoval could not avenge his friend in real life he did so through literature. It is also important to note that there is an element of anonymity to these tales. Although Silva Sandoval did publish his *corrido*, not all ballad composers publish their songs. As McDowell has noted, "in cases involving allegations of misconduct by government agents, corrido makers exercise caution in releasing their *corridos* to the public" (*Poetry and Violence* 180). Future scholars of *costeño corridos* should keep in mind that unpublished *corridos* do exist and one should exercise caution when sharing them with the public.

As McDowell notes in his most recent work on *corridos* in the Costa Chica *¡Corrido!: The Living Ballad of Mexico's Western Coast* (2015), ballads provide an insight into how *costeños* view themselves and what they value:

> The *corridos* provide a self-portrait in words and images selected by the poets and songsters, subject to the approval of their audiences, rather than an ethnographic account filtered through the eyes of an outside observer. *Corrido* poets render the experience of the community even as they elevate it to a plane of the ideal where all protagonists are either honored or dishonored by their words and deeds. These narratives can be savored for the insights provided into localities: the local rivalries underlying large historical movements, local attitudes toward state and federal authority, the resistance of local

> populations toward the incursion of external political and economic forces. (*¡Corrido!* 20)

In other words, one need not debate whether *costeños* have a history or are aware that they have a history. Through ballads, *costeños* have kept a sense of cohesive identity and developed their own sense of ethics. As one of McDowell's respondents noted, "for them [the young men], it is glorious to die like the heroes in the songs!"(*¡Corrido!* xiii).

A Site to Air Out Grievances: the Costeño Corrido and the Trinidadian Calypso

The *corrido* genre in the Costa Chica is not at all dissimilar to other resistant music genres found throughout former European colonies. For example, the calypso, which originated in Trinidad and Tobago, shares similarities with the *corrido* genre. As Zena Moore notes, the calypso and *corrido* both arose as a response to oppressive colonial and post-colonial regimes:

> Like the calypso, the corrido and the romance are male dominated songs, having emerged out of a patriarchal system. The original conjunto musicians were raised in rural, proletarian settings, with parents who worked in the fields, and most of them received almost no schooling. Like the old calypsonians, many top singers died quite destitute, earning just enough to satisfy their economic needs, but not enough to make them rich. […] They are marginalized by those of the dominant culture, but they dominate (occupy central positions in) the subculture. (220)

In other words, these genres can be read as a response to the oppressive systems which have historically spoken for marginalized communities and not allowed them or given them space to speak.

Take for example the ballad of "Juan Santiago" (2018) sung by the *corrido* band *Fandango Costeño* and the calypso "Police Doing It Too" (1963) by Young Killer. These two songs call out police brutality and critique the impunity that is often granted police officers even in contemporary times. Although I have included the dates of these songs, it is important to remember that many of these songs build upon previous songs, so in a sense, although the songs may have an author and may be sung by one singer, they are also part of a ballad collective. As McDowell notes, many of the ballads in the Costa Chica have no singular author:

> the *corrido* repertoire on Guerrero's coasts includes a number of ballads that have achieved wide circulation among singers and a general popularity with audiences. These are ballads I have heard and recorded in Acapulco as well as in the towns and villages of the Costa Grande and the Costa Chica. Some of these songs are known primarily along the coasts; others are known through the state and beyond. […] Taken together, they serve as introduction to the *corrido* of the coasts in its several aspects: as record of local events, as repository of regional history, as forum for political commentary, as archive of the people's poetic tradition. (*¡Corrido!* 23)

Like the folktales seen in chapter one of this dissertation, the ballads are also communal. Of course, ballad composers continue to create their own songs and their own lyrics, but if these songs catch on and become popular, it is not uncommon for them to be sung elsewhere and by other people. Ballads protect *costeños*' poetic traditions and history. In the absence of libraries dedicated to *costeño* poetics and history, ballad composers seem to carry the history of the region on their guitar strings and voices. And in the absence of public forums to air out one's grievances, the ballad composers once again put the people's dissatisfaction into words and make music out of it. In the Trinidad calypso tradition, since the late 1920s, there is actually a building

– a "tent" – which people gather to hear the calypsonian, and sometimes to respond when a chanted call demands a response.

In the ballad of "Juan Santiago," the tragic death of its title figure is narrated through the gaze of a *costeño* ballad singer. The ballad singer begins his song by asking his audience to please give him a bit of their time. He sets the stage by claiming that a police officer has unjustly killed Juan Santiago. Juan was killed on a Sunday night after attending and betting at a cockfight. After the cockfight, he walked home drunk. Because he was drunk, he was stopped by police officers who began to beat him without reason. Being a proper *costeño* man, Juan *no se rajó,* meaning that he did not allow himself to be stepped on and he paid for his honor with his life. The singer ends the ballad by warning the police officer, who gave the fatal blow, that his name has been written on the walls of the town and that Juan's brothers will seek revenge. In this ballad, the *corridista* encourages Juan's brothers to go after the police officer who abused his power.

In essence, what could be interpreted as resisting arrest and fighting a police officer can also be interpreted as being a man and doing what a man does in the world of the ballad. In other words, the idea that police officers must be respected and obeyed at all times is not in line with the world of the ballad. In the world of the ballad, police officers who abuse their power can expect to be killed in retaliation. These are songs of resistance because they encourage the oppressed to resist their oppressors.

"Juan Santiago" shares similarities with an earlier song from Trinidad and Tobago titled "Police Doing It Too" (1963). In a similar fashion, the calypsonian singer Young Killer narrates violent homicides carried out by police officers in Port of Spain, the capital of Trinidad and Tobago. In "Police Doing It Too," Young Killer sets the stage by narrating a domestic dispute

between a husband and wife. The husband in the song wants to join the police force but his wife threatens to leave him if he does. The wife notes that the national guard and hooligans are not different from one another. The wife asserts that the police force in Trinidad and Tobago is worse than hooligans because at least hooligans get arrested for their crimes whereas police officers do not. After this brief husband-and-wife exchange, an omniscient narrator steps in and explains the extent of the violence committed by police officers. He breaks into song and details a list of crimes committed so far. Then the audience joins in and also accuses the Trinidadian police force of corruption:

> Who you think kill the man in Savannah?
>
> Is a policeman!
>
> Who you think they hold in Bonanza?
>
> Is a policeman!
>
> Who stab he wife Diego Martin?
>
> Is a policeman!
>
> Who accuse poor Cadogan and get away smiling?
>
> Is a policeman!

Through this style of questioning and answering, a variation on the call-and-response form much discussed in African literature, the singer does not educate the audience, but rather, knowledge is made communally and in the moment. As Nathan Keegan notes, the call-and-response in Africa was a democratizing process that elevated the listener from passive listener to co-creator (10). In this sense, songs are not hierarchical and information is not passed from the singer to the audience but instead communal knowledge is privileged.

The calypsonian, like the *corridista,* encourages his audience to stay vigilant and safe around police officers. As Young Killer states, it's best to just hide when you see a policeman because they will attack you and say that they were just defending themselves or blame someone else for your death when they were the ones who caused it:

When they have their guns at their side

For safety, best you run and hide

For they go wait patiently until you pass

Shoot at you, and say you had a cutlass

But if the shot catch you in your back

Then they go say is renegades can attack.

In essence, Young Killer is pointing out the irony in having a police force to keep the people safe when police officers are the ones doing the killing. In fact, the crimes that the police officers commit justify their own existence. The community supposedly needs a police force because the people are violent, but in reality, the violence that is present is coming from elsewhere—the police force—not the community itself. As Young Killer notes, even when someone is shot in the back and all the evidence points towards a corrupt police officer, the policeman only needs to say that he did not do it and that a renegade, a backstabber in the community, did it to get away with it. The police officer is able to say this and be believed because the community and the people are already criminalized.

Young Killer's song points to a disturbing dichotomy that police forces are alleged to create. They create a criminal/non-criminal state. There is no room for humanity and constructive anger in an environment like this. The heavy police presence is justified because the people are already assumed to be a criminal people. Since the people are already "criminals," the

police officers are by default always innocent and it is the people who must continuously prove their innocence.

Moreover, the title of the song, "Police Doing It Too," points to the contradictory status of the police force. If the police force is there to help lessen the violence in the community, how can the police possibly lessen violence by responding with violence? It is a case of the blind leading the blind. How can there be any other mode of justice if violence is all the oppressed can hope to learn from their oppressors?

As one examines the cultural productions of the Costa Chica and Trinidad and Tobago, it is evident that there is a general preoccupation with police violence, systems of power, and a lack of political space to air grievances. The *corrido* and calypso then become sites where the community as a whole can voice grievances and enact change in the absence of a justice system that takes their concerns seriously. As is seen in the ballads of the Costa Chica, members of the community are ready to act and defend their homes and loved ones from those who abuse power; and in the *calypso* genre, crimes carried out by police officers are brought to light, and in this sense, marginalized communities create safety for themselves.

Due to the male emotional release that is associated with *corridos*, it is evident that *corridos* are the vehicle through which *costeño* men negotiate their colonized and male status. As ballad scholar Zena Moore has pointed out, *corridos* in Mexico are discourses where the male voice is heard:

> It is important to remember that these two art forms [the calypso and *corrido*] are male dominated. They are discourse patterns of men talking to men about "men" matters. The notion of "man among men" is built on the old Greek patriarchal society where only men

were seen as intellectually fit to “speak” in public. Performance in verbal artistry was considered a male domain, a male prerogative. (229)

Although I agree that *corridos*, at least in the Costa Chica, primarily revolve around the escapades of men and the daily activities of men, I contend that these are not just tales of men celebrating one another but also tales that protect the community. Increasingly, women participate in both the calypso and the *corrido*, and voices of resistance are incorporated into the general theme and text of the calypso. Women calypsonians also sing about and repudiate male abuse. These forms incorporate the changing voices of the communities out of which they are born.

The male voice in these *corridos* are not just showing off “the Mexican male [as] super macho” but also negotiating a complicated space of being colonized *and* a male who is supposed to provide protection for his family and community (Moore 222). The *corridos* showcase how a whole different set of values need to be created when living in and negotiating with a justice system that is not just to marginalized peoples.

In the next section, I examine how *costeña* women create their own values in patriarchal, *mestizo* normative spaces. As has been seen in this section, men can rely on their physical strength to dominate others and avenge their loved ones, but physical violence is largely seen as a male form of expression. How do women then express themselves in spaces where they cannot rely on their physical strength? How do they seek out justice for themselves in colorist, sexist spaces?

Section II: Talking Back, Afro-Mexican Women and *Versos* in the Costa Chica

In this section, I examine the African roots of *versear* in the Costa Chica, and I compare *costeño* versos to Afro-Peruvian songs of resistance. I suggest that Afro-Mexican orality is also shaped by the fact that *costeña* women use the practice of *versear* (to throw a verse) to combat European beauty standards left behind by European colonization. Afro-Mexicans liken their skin color to the black pearl of the ocean to show that they can valorize Blackness and resist people who may try to put them down for their dark skin.

The African Origins of versear

In their introduction to the collection *Alma Cimarrona*, Torres Díaz and Reyes Larrea, who are teachers in the Costa Chica, assert that one of the inheritances from Africa that *costeños* still practice today is that of *versear*, which means to spontaneously come up with a verse to respond to ridicule, compliments, or advice. One of the mainstays of Costa Chica life is verbal sparring. Women resort to fighting back with words in the absence of physical prowess. Costa Chicans often turn to couplets and poetry to express how they are feeling and to pass down wisdom and strategies of psychological resistance to younger generations. According to Torres Díaz and Reyes Larrea, women excel in this sport and "en los versos costeños, por encima de los varones, son las mujeres quienes más destacan en este ramo" (7). Meaning that, when it comes to coastal verses, women dominate men.

As my primary source, I analyze *Alma Cimarrona: versos costeños y poesía regional* (1998) by Angustia Torres Díaz and Israel Reyes Larrea. Torres Díaz and Reyes Larrea are

educators in the Costa Chica and they compiled this collection of Costa Chica oral couplets and poetry. The collection was funded by the Programa de Apoyo a las Culturas Municipales y Comunitarias (PACMYC) after anthropologists like María Cristina Díaz Pérez, as seen in chapter one, noted that Costa Chicans had a distinct culture that would be lost if it were not recorded for future generations. The couplets in this collection were collected from the Costa Chica region of Oaxaca and Guerrero over a series of years and finally published in 1998 with funding from local and national government programs.[7]

I focus on this collection because it is the first to be compiled by Afro-Mexican scholars from within the community. There are of course many Afro-Mexican poets such as Francisco Javier Zárate Arango, Abel Emigdio Baños Delgado, and Filemón Silva Sandoval who have achieved success within and outside the Costa Chica and have dedicated readers from within the community who do not hesitate to speak their mind when a poem or story is not to their liking. But in this chapter, I want to focus on the poetry that does not belong to the individual but the collective. I am interested in analyzing the role that *versos* have in empowering Black women and girls in the Costa Chica. I look to these *versos* because they reveal the issues that women and girls in the Costa Chica share.

I expand on Torres Díaz and Reyes Larrea's observation that the practice of *versear* comes from an African tradition and further add that the practice of *versear* comes specifically from a West African tradition. Take for example the Wolof song below, recorded by Marame Gueye in Gorée, Senegal in 2003, that is traditionally used to insult a co-wife when she enters

[7] Although the Costa Chica is divided into two different states, locals simply refer to this region as *la Costa* or *La Costa Chica.* Unless I am referring specifically to the Mexican state of Oaxaca or Guerrero, I shall refer to the Costa Chica simply as the Costa Chica.

the family. The song below can be read as a way for the first wife and her friends to express their frustration with the new wife and get the fighting and insults out of the way before the serious work of living, organizing, and rearing children together can begin:

The “First Wives” ask:

Doesn’t the bride have friends?

Look at the bitchy old ladies she came with.

Doesn’t the bride have friends?

She has only one bundle and her ass.

Looks like a seasonal worker to me!

The “New Wives” reply”

You don’t have perfume

You don’t have incense

You are smelly ladies!

You don’t have perfume

You don’t have incense

Your vaginas are tiny!

The “First Wives” respond:

If your father claims that he went to Mecca

He is lying

He never got to Gorée island!

The “New Wives” hurl back”

You don’t have soap

You use the foam from your pussy to wash your clothes!

(Gueye qtd. in Sidikou and Hale 52)

In the Wolof song above, one can see the role of orality as an emotional release. Moreover, one can also note the lack of physical fighting between women. All fighting is done through words. The Wolof song is similar to how other doubly marginalized communities have resorted to words or hand gestures to avoid physical violence between one another. Take for example, the finger snaps used in the gay Black male community in the 1980s. In his documentary *Tongues Untied* (1989), Marlon Riggs notes that the finger snaps used among Black gay men were used "to read, to punctuate, to cut like a whip" (00:10:00). In a similar manner, the Wolof women use poetry to "read"—communicate with—one another and create a hierarchy. The poem should be understood as more than just a wave of insults hurled at the new wives but a sizing up of women and ascertaining of who will dominate and who will be dominated.

While much research has been done on the world of the ballad and how men dominate one another and set up a hierarchy amongst each other, women's poetry reveals the intricacies of women's lives and the hierarchies that they form as well. These hierarchies reveal what women prize and admire in one another. For example, the Wolof song reveals that cleverness, wittiness, and levelheadedness are valued over physical strength. None of these women sets out to kill another or exact vengeance on behalf of a slain sister or replaced First Wife. Women's poetry reveals how women regulate one another and maintain harmony with one another through language.

Versos in the Costa Chica

The regulating function of women's poetry can be seen in the section "De Amor y Piropos" in *Alma Cimarrona*. In "De Amor y Piropos," readers witness how *costeña* women use words to defend themselves in the absence of physical prowess. In the verse below, an Afro-Mexican woman defends herself after being chastised for her dark skin tone by a complete stranger:

Si por morena me desprecias	If my brown color makes you despise me
no maldigas mi color,	don't curse my color,
que entre piernas y diamantes	between legs and diamonds
la morena es la mejor!	The brown woman is the best!

In this *verso*, the Black woman in question can be seen snapping back and correcting the man who has insulted her for having brown skin. She states that if she were compared to other women or jewelry she would still come out at top because the brown women are the best. The poem reveals how the woman relies on her wittiness and cleverness to defend herself. In essence, instead of giving her opponent the satisfaction of leaving her stunned she responds and asserts her dominance.

As Medhin Tewolde Serrano's notes in her documentary *Negra* (2020), young *costeña* girls are taught oral *versos* to combat the shame of Blackness that they will be subject to both within and outside the community. In her documentary, filmed in Oaxaca and Guerrero in 2020, Tewolde Serrano interviewed five women and girls to get a better sense of what it is like to be an Afro-Mexican girl or woman in the region. Tewolde Serrano's interviews reveal that older women pass down *versos* to the younger generation so that young Afro-Mexican women can

verbally arm themselves and strike back when they are attacked. This song is featured in the film and occurs towards the end of the film:[8]

Si por negra me desprecias,	if you despise me for being Black,
no maldigas mi color,	don't damn my color,
que entre perlas y diamantes,	for between diamonds and pearls,
por ser negra; soy mejor	simply for being Black I am the best.

The poem that young girls are taught to recite protects them well into adulthood and teaches them to be proud of their Black skin color and to compare it to the rare and beautiful black pearls of the ocean. Instead of being ashamed of their Blackness, older women teach younger women to be proud of their beauty and to remember that in the business of diamonds and pearls, the black ones are the best, so why should they as Black women not be the best or ranked among the best?

The figurative language in the text cited above is not unlike similar language used in other locations shaped by European colonial occupation. For example, one of the most famous songs about Afro-Peruvian pride and beauty can be found among Black women and girls. In "Me gritaron negra" (1978) by Victoria Santa Cruz, an adult Afro-Peruvian woman recalls being called *negra* when she was just five years old:

Tenía siete años apenas	I was only seven years old
Apenas siete años	Barely seven years old
Qué siete años?	What seven years old?
No llegaba a cinco siquiera!	Not even five!

[8] The film was played during a film festival in Switzerland, which I attended, so I unfortunately do not have a time stamp for the song's exact location in the film.

De pronto unas voces en la calle	Suddenly some voices in the street
Me gritaron negra!	They shouted: nigger!
[…]	[...]
Me alacié el cabello	I straightened my hair
Me polvee la cara	I powdered my face
Y entre mis entrañas	And between my insides
Siempre resonaba la misma palabra	The same word always resounded
Negra, negra, negra, negra!	Black, Black, Black, Black, Black!
Negra, negra, negra!	Black, Black, Black, Black!

As she recounts this story to her audience, she emphasizes that she was not called *negra* in a sweet tone but rather in an insulting way. She was so shocked and ashamed of being called *negra* in this manner that she ran back home and the older women in her community helped her straighten her hair and powdered her face to whiten her dark hue. Although the first-person narrator states that she straightened her own hair, it is important to note that it would be really hard for a five-year-old girl to obtain the necessary chemicals and tools to do that. It is more likely that the older women in her family helped her straighten her hair and powder her face.

It is only when the narrator is much older and reaches a mental breaking point that she questions why she should be ashamed to be Black:

Hasta que un día que retrocedía y retrocedía	Until one day I was retreating and retreating
Y que iba a caer!	that I was going to fall!
[…]	[...]
De hoy en adelante no quiero	From now on I don't want to
Alaciar mi cabello (No quiero!)	Straighten my hair (I don’t want to!)

Y voy a reírme de aquellos	And I will laugh at those
Que por evitar, según ellos	That to avoid, according to them
Que por evitarnos algún sin sabor	That to avoid being rude or tasteless
Llaman a los negros gente de color	They call Black people colored people
¿Y de qué color? (Negro!)	And what color? (Black!)
Y que lindo suena (Negro!)	And how nice it sounds (Black!)
[…]	[...]
Al fin, al fin comprendí (Al fin!)	At last, at last I understand (At last!)
Ya no retrocedo (Al fin!)	I won't back down anymore (At last!)
Y avanzo segura (Al fin!)	Straighten my hair (I don't want to!)
Avanzo y espero! (Al fin!)	And I'll advance with confidence (At last!)
Y bendigo el cielo	And I bless the heavens
Por que quiso Dios	Because it was God's will
Que negro azabache fuese mi color	That jet black should be my hue
Y ya comprendí (Al fin!)	I understand at last!
Ya tengo la llave	I have the key

It is in this moment in the song that she decides that next time someone calls her *negra* in an insulting manner she will fight back and not bow her head like she usually does. The next time someone calls her *negra*, she shouts back and says, "yes, it is so sweet to be Black," and she starts singing along with her taunters and tells them that she isn't going to straighten her hair anymore or powder her face and demands that they call her *negra* and not *mujer de color* (woman of color).

Ironically, it is when she embraces being called *negra* that her taunters try to use the supposedly polite *mujer de color* identifier instead. The speaker's abusers have no problem calling her *negra* as a way to insult her. It is only when she takes the word *negra* and bathes herself in it and accepts the beauty of all things Black that her taunters become afraid and try to take back the power she has found for herself. In this song, the speaker's acceptance of her Black self disrupts the white supremacist notion of Black shame and inferiority that plagues her community. The adult persona in the song does not allow the negative connotation of *negra* to be used around her and instead like the young girls and women in the Costa Chica, she portrays Blackness as something positive rather than negative. She compares Blackness to sweet, black sugar. At the end of the song, when people call her *negra* she says "Yes! And so, what?!" By accepting her identity and being proud of her skin color she disarms those who try to weaponize her own skin color against her. Race and the particular expression of colorism are constant themes in these performative verses.

In the next section, I examine how *costeño* poetry relies on the image of the Black maroon mother to combat the ideology of *mestizo* Mexico. It is of course a bit ironic that the same dark skinned Black women who must defend themselves from colorism in the Costa Chica are at the same time celebrated in *costeño* poetry. In the next section, I examine how the supposedly undesirable Black woman in the Costa Chica is at the same time the foundation of *costeño* society. For as these poems suggest, without the Black maroon mother there would be no Black men and the Costa Chica would immediately cease to exist.

Section III: The Costa Chica & the *Cimarrona* Mother Figure

In this section, I trace how the Costa Chica came to be defined by the *cimarrona*, the self-liberated, maroon female figure. I argue that the *cimarrona* figure allows *costeños* to rewrite history in such a way that they are included and emerge as protagonists of their own stories.

The Shipwreck

As Laura Lewis notes, all along the Costa Chica people tell a story about a foreign shipwreck and its human cargo of enslaved people who escaped the sinking vessel and found freedom on land (62). The tale is passed down from generation to generation and helps Costa Chicans understand their place in Mexican society and to an extent why they experience racial discrimination the way they do in comparison to other Mexican citizens. For example, when sharing the origins of *costeños* with her teacher, Rosa, a fifth-grade student from Guerrero, Mexico, shared her handed down version of the events:

> I was told that a ship once arrived in front of a small village. The boat arrived and there were many blacks on it. And then one day the ship, the ship sank, it sank and they say that blacks started coming out from the ship one by one. And they say that they came to the village, got married and had children, and grew to be more and more. (Masferrer León 1)

Further on in her story, Rosa explains that even if she were blind and could not physically see Blacks, she would know they were around because she would hear someone saying, "I'm not sitting next to you because you are brown" (qtd. in Masferrer León 2). Although Rosa was a

small child at the time of the interview in 2012, the communal story that was passed down to her reveals that Afro-Mexicans on the Costa Chica collectively understand that they are tied to the transatlantic slave trade and are therefore different from other Mexicans and viewed continuously as the other.

Even though the shipwreck tale is apocryphal, it does two important things. The tale explains that Blacks landed in the Costa Chica from distant lands and the tale removes Costa Chica's Blacks from servitude. According to the boat story, *costeños* were never enslaved but landed on the shores of the Costa Chica as free men and women. The tale rejects the idea that only European and Native Americans make up the Mexican national body; and also, it seems, by imbibing the European-influenced notion that enslaved Africans were inferior. So that even if the color can't be hidden, the argument can be advanced that *costeños* are a different kind of Blacks: Blacks who were never enslaved in the Americas.

In essence, through the boat origin story, *costeños* engage in a rewriting of national history. When the Spaniards arrived, they did not just bring along their European selves but also brought enslaved Africans with them. Moreover, the boat story nuances the idea that Europeans arrived on the shores of Mexico without resistance. In the boat story, the ocean itself is an actor that resists colonization and enslavement in Mexico. Take into consideration that the slave ship sank and that the only survivors were those people who were destined to be enslaved but were not. Through this narrative, *costeños* can re-imagine themselves as a people who have always been free and never served under slavery. In essence, the Costa Chica transforms into a mythical coastal strip where their ancestors were destined to live freely and free of harm and persecution. In my travels and interviews with respondents, I have heard various versions of this story, but I

have yet to see it written down anywhere. It seems to be an oral story passed down from generation to generation.

The Descendants of the Shipwreck

Costa Chicans understand their identity through a variation of what Édouard Glissant calls "The Open Boat." Glissant calls the transatlantic slave trade a birth that went "straight from the belly of the slave ship into the violent belly of the ocean depths" and "became something shared and made us, the descendants, one people among others" (5). In essence, the crashed boat upon an undefined territory in either the coastal strip of Oaxaca or Guerrero gave birth to the now present-day Afro-Mexicans, who are glorified in the world of the ballad as heroic and engaging in violence only when necessary.

I find Glissant's open boat theory helpful because my trips to Mexico have shown me that many Afro-Mexicans do not just see themselves as Blacks in Mexico but as Blacks who are tied to the greater African diaspora in the Americas. During the *I Foro de Jovenes Afromexicanos: Historia, identidad, pertenencia y orgullo afromexicano*, mentioned above, I witnessed Afro-Mexicans interacting with Afro-Costa Rican activists and creating a shared knowledge base and community to combat anti-Black racism. Moreover, during my visit to Mexico in April 2022, it was not uncommon for me to see translated works from African American writers such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks and Angela Davis in Afro-Mexican activists' homes, for example, in Hugo Arellanes Antonio's and Gina Dièdhiou's personal libraries. Through shared resistance with other Afro diasporic peoples, Afro-Mexicans combat *mestizo* normativity.

Most Afro-Mexican writers and activists read works produced by other Black writers and are constantly in conversation with activists from the Black diasporic world that is not limited to the United States but reaches out to the rest of the Americas and Europe. As Gina Diédhiou, an Afro-Mexican activist of Senegalese descent, shared with me in April 2022, "we Mexicans have no language to understand racism. Racism is relegated to classism in Mexico. It is by learning from other Afro scholars that we understand how to verbalize and fight against our situation." Once again, the verbal art of sparring is prized among Afro-Mexican women.

Maroon Poetry as Historical Memory

While the Mexican nation has traditionally been understood through a Native American and European lens, Costa Chicans understand their identity through the *cimarrona* figure. This perception of self and nation is reflected in the couplets and other artistic productions from the Costa Chica. Even though the Costa Chica is bordered by the Pacific Ocean, the memory of the transatlantic slave trade lives on in the community and fills the poetry of the region. In the poem "*Costa*" by Rubén Mora, in *Alma cimarrona*'s section "Poesías Regionales," the Costa Chica is personified as a woman of African and European ancestry:

Costa jocunda y risueña	*Costa*, pleasant and cheerful
como puede ser la costa,	as a coast can be,
mujer de cintura angosta	narrow-waisted woman
de ardiente carne trigueña	of burning brown flesh
dentro de tu alma costeña	within your coastal soul
plantó su feria la vida	life planted its treasures

[…]

Costa de sangre mulata,	Coast of mulatta blood,
de toros, naipes y gallos,	of bulls, cards and roosters,
de amores y de caballos	of love and horses

In the stanzas above, the Costa Chica, a geographic space, is presented as an attractive woman of mixed African and European ancestry. When read in conjunction with the boat story, the Costa Chica woman who is attractive and cheerful can be read as a metaphor for the Costa Chica itself. The Costa Chica is a coastal region of temperate climate, abundant livestock, fertile soil, colorful fauna, and virgin forests and rivers. Behind this beautiful, temperate region of course lies a dark story.

The link to the transatlantic slave trade is reinforced through the imagery of cattle. As Paulette Ramsay notes, the history of cattle and slavery in Mexico go hand in hand. As soon as Spanish colonists established that cattle, sugarcane, and agricultural products could thrive in Mexico, Spaniards worked with English colonists to bring in enslaved Africans to Mexico:

> Mexico, like the Caribbean, was the site of fierce combat and contestation as European expeditioners fought to take control of territories. Slavery ensued in both regions once it was established that the regions were extremely useful for the production of cattle, sugarcane and other agricultural products. Mexico's relationship with Jamaica, in particular, existed from as early as the colonial period […] In 1713, this relationship was further fortified when the English were given the sole right to provide slaves to the Spanish colonies. (*Afro-Mexican Constructions* Ch.5)

When read through this historical lens, the mention of cattle and horses in the poem is elevated from what can be interpreted as a random act of writing to one that is tied and tuned into the collective and shared knowledge of the Costa Chica.

In fact, one of the most popular dances in the Costa Chica, the *fandango,* is characterized not by dancing on a wooden slab or platform as it is done in Spain but the flattened back of a wooden horse. As Manuel Apocada Valdez points out, for Costa Chicans the horse is a symbol of resistance. On the coast, one of the most popular dances is the *fandango*. During festivities, *costeños* often dance the *fandango* atop a wooden horse's flattened back; the horse's back is flattened out to accommodate the dancers (225). Below I share a picture from Hector Moreno's Facebook page, where he shares this dance with his followers, as well as other dance and music traditions from the Costa Chica (Moreno). Moreno is on the right:

Figure 4: A picture from Hector Moreno's Facebook page, where he shares this dance with his followers.

As Don Melquiades Domínguez, a singer and Costa Chican artisan, pointed out, the dance is tied to a history of resistance in the Costa Chica, "al bailar sobre la artesa lo hacían para burlarse de los amos blancos, simulando que estaban danzando sobre sus opresores" (our ancestors danced on the wooden horse to mock the white masters, pretending that they were dancing on their oppressors.) (qtd. in Apocada Valdez 225). Given this context, it is interesting too to note how what may have been introduced as parody, a response to oppressive conditions from those subject to oppression, can become part of the performed art and history of a region. Thus, the terms that are used in the poetry such as *mulatta* and bulls and horses point to a history of colonization in the region. The *mulatta* and the bulls and the horses are not native to the Costa Chica. And now they, animal, and human, in a *fandango* dance, celebrate their liberation from their Spanish oppressors.

The Memory of Marronage is Written in the Landscape

The *cimarrona* figure is not only depicted as a very attractive woman in the region's poetry but also as a mother figure. In the poem "Costa Chica Mia" by Álvaro Carrillo from *Alma cimarrona,* the *cimarrona* figure is depicted as a force that keeps *costeños* safe from harm. She is depicted as a supernatural being that birthed the Costa Chica single handedly and out of her own entrails:

Morena serrera de cuerpo	Curvy brown woman of
cenceño	thin waist
y alma cimarrona,	and maroon soul,
costa chica mía, […]	my Costa Chica

te guardan aisladas	you are guarded and isolated
tus grandes montañas,	by your great mountains
montañas azules,	blue mountains,
hermanas del cielo	sisters of the sky
hechas con el barro	made with the mud
de tu propia entraña	of your own entrails

Once again, the Costa Chica is personified as a woman in this poem. The Costa Chica moves beyond being a physical space to a metaphysical region where the physical spaces that people see such as mountains, hills, and blue skies are not really material but all part of a large metaphysical *maroon* woman who constantly guards and watches over the people of the Costa Chica. Once again, the mountains and the hills can be interpreted as a sort of promised land for *cimarrones*, those maroons who were escaping enslavement and found refuge in the most remote parts of the Costa Chica.

The idea of the Black woman as the founder of the Costa Chica is recurrent in the poetry of the region. In another poem "Negrita Cimarrona" (Black Maroon Woman)—written by the editor himself—Israel Reyes Larrea–and featured in *Alma cimarrona*, Reyes Larrea includes elements of women's *versos* in his poetry to celebrate Black women in his poetry in a way that no other poet to my knowledge has done:

De tierras muy lejanas	From faraway lands
Heredó en su piel, el color,	She inherited in her skin, the color,
la alegría, la bravura	joy, valor
y bailar con sabor […]	and the flair for dancing […]
Orgullosa ella ejta	She is proud

del color achapopotao de su	of the tar-like color of her
piel,	skin,
de su cabecita puchunca	of her curly hair
y de esos labios de miel	and those lips of honey
Si por negra—dice—	If for being Black—she says—
Me desprecias	you despise me
No maldigas mi color	don't damn my color
Entre perlas y diamantes	Between diamonds and pearls
¡la morena es la mejor*!*	the Black one is the best!
No maldigo mi mulata,	I do not curse you mulatta,
no maldigo tu color,	I do not curse your color,
pue' de no juyirte conmigo	If you had not runaway with me,
no tendría hoy yo tu amor.	I would not have your love today.[9]

Although the *cimarrona* figure is usually portrayed as a solitary agent that founded the Costa Chica for her children, the poem above displays the maroon woman as having run away with a Black man. The *cimarrona* figure is portrayed as running away willingly with a Black man and then founding the Costa Chica with him. In this sense, the *cimarrona* represents a rejection of Eurocentric beauty standards.

While most Mexican girls and women to this day are advised to marry a white man so that their children will be better off, the idealized *cimarrona* figure in this poem breaks away from what is socially accepted for Mexican women and instead chooses to love a Black man and

[9] achapopotao= tar like & puchunca=curly

thus ensures the continuation of *costeños* in the Costa Chica. The *cimarrona* mother serves as an example of back talk to 20th century notions of European superiority. Despite the anti-Black beauty standards both within and outside the Costa Chica, the Black Mexican woman forms a sense of self-esteem, love, and pride that is not dependent on the approval of the nation or her *costeño* community. In other words, she survives despite everything. The Black woman and the Costa Chica can be interpreted as two sides of the same coin. The Costa Chica woman who is the brown woman of the hills survives despite everything in the same way that the living and breathing brown and Black woman who walks, breathes, and swims survives despite everything that has been designed to tear her down.

In Summary

In the first section of this chapter, I demonstrated how *corridos* (ballads) in the Costa Chica are in line with West African storytelling practices. I show that when Afro-Mexican cultural production such as ballads are read alongside their West African storytelling traditions, a richer and transcontinental and transnational reading can occur. These readings of course can only occur if the habit of reading Afro-Mexican works through a *mestizo* normativity lens is suspended.

In section two, I argued that *costeña* women use the art of *versear* to combat colorism in the Costa Chica. I argued that their verbal sparring practices have roots in West African women's poetry and are not at all dissimilar to other strategies found among the Afro-Peruvian women and girls.

In the third section, I examined how the image of the maroon (*cimarrona*) mother for Afro-Mexicans is used to combat *mestizo* normativity. By creating their own myth of origin, Afro-Mexicans write themselves into Mexico's history and they take ownership of their story by depicting themselves as a people who have always been free and have always been in Mexico.

While I argued, in the first chapter, that Afro-Mexican folktales share similarities with West and Central African folktales, in this chapter I argued that Afro-Mexican cultural productions such as ballads, *versos*, and poetry also tie *costeños* to the larger African diasporas in the Americas such as Peru and Trinidad and Tobago.

In the next chapter, I turn to the cultural productions—written poetry and autobiography—of Afro-Mexican writers in the United States because they show that Afro-Mexicans in the United States and the Costa Chica are fighting a similar fight. They may come from different backgrounds and different time periods, but the recurrent demand is the demand for visibility and a demand for an inclusive telling of Mexico's history on both sides of the border.

Chapter Three: Looking Forward & Back: Afro-Mexican Literature from the U.S. Southwest

> When not copping out, when we know we are more than nothing, we call ourselves Mexican, referring to race and ancestry; *mestizo* when affirming both our Indian and Spanish (but we hardly ever own our Black ancestory); Chicano when referring to a politically aware people born and/or raised in the U.S.; *Raza* when referring to Chicanos
>
> –Gloria Anzaldúa, from *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*[10]

As Gloria Anzaldúa notes in her work *Borderlands/ La Frontera* (1987), Mexico's African heritage is often subsumed by *mestizo* normativity in both Mexico and the U.S. diaspora. As seen in chapter one, nation building projects carried out in the 20th century led to what I have been calling *mestizo* normativity. As I use this term, I borrow from queer studies and from Judith Butler's work on heteronormativity. In her work *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler notes that writings on sexuality already assume heterosexuality. For example, the Oedipus and Electra complex are both classical theories that assume children's sexuality and assume that children will be psychosexually drawn to the parent of the opposite sex. As Butler notes, these theories were only able to come about because heterosexuality is assumed. Heterosexuality is supposedly the default sexuality for all people. As Butler notes, "we read the desire for the father as evidence of a feminine disposition only because we begin, despite the postulation of primary bisexuality,

[10] This is a deliberate misspelling in Anzaldúa's work *Borderlands*, probably a combination of "ancestor" and "story."

with a heterosexual matrix for desire" (77). I borrow from Butler and note that the same assuming of identity occurs in Mexican American studies. As Anzaldúa so aptly notes in *Borderlands*, Mexico's African heritage is routinely subsumed and erased in favor of a *mestizo* normativity that makes the Euro and/or Amerindian *mestizo* the default for Mexican and even Mexican American experiences.

As I read Afro-Mexican works written by writers in the U.S. diaspora, I am focusing on what they add to the field of Mexican American studies in the United States. In essence, I examine how these writers' perceptions of race are formed in the U.S. and I examine how and why these writers look to Mexico to make sense of their shared Black and Mexican ancestry. Moreover, I am interested in how these writers disrupt notions of assumed *mestizo* normativity through their writings.

This chapter is organized into three sections. The first section examines María Rosario Jackson's autobiography "Profile of an Afro-Latina: Black, Mexican, Both" in *The Afro-Latin@ Reader* (2010), edited by Miriam Jiménez and Juan Flores. The volume was initially intended to serve as a reader for courses in Latin@ race and culture across various higher education institutions but the volume grew and became the first compiled collection of Afro-Latino/a voices in the United States. In her autobiography, Jackson looks to her African American father and Mexican mother to make sense of her forced *costeño* identity in Mexico City and her forced Black identity in California. In neither Mexico City or California is she allowed to be both Black and Mexican. In the second section, I analyze selected works from Alán Pelaez Lopez's poetry collection *Intergalactic Travels* (2020). [11] Pelaez Lopez is very similar to the *costeño* writers seen in chapters one and two. They come from an Afro-Mexican town in Oaxaca and can be

[11] Alán Pelaez Lopez is a non-binary writer and uses they/them as personal pronouns.

aptly called a *costeño* writer in the U.S. diaspora. In my third section, I analyze poems from Ariana Brown's collections *Sana Sana* (2020) and *We are Owed* (2021). In her poetry collections, Brown looks to Mexico and the history of Gaspar Yanga, an enslaved African who rebelled and founded the first freed Black town in Veracruz, Mexico, to make sense of her dual African American and Mexican American heritage. These writers turn to Mexico not so much as an affirmation of their Blackness but as an affirmation of the fact that one can be both Black and Mexican and that Mexico is already a Black country filled with Black history. These writers belie *mestizo* normativity.

Section I: María Rosario Jackson, The Autobiography of an African American Mexican Woman

In "Profile of an Afro-Latina: Black, Mexican, Both" (2010), Jackson challenges a received African American and Mexican history that often shows no recognition or possible connection between African American and Mexican artists. By sharing her family's experiences in Mexico City and the predominantly Black working-class neighborhood of Crenshaw, California, she illustrates a buried history of artistic resistance that African Americans, fleeing Jim Crow, and Mexican muralists, fighting for equality in Mexico, shared.

In her autobiography Jackson shares how she received two versions of American history, one passed on to her by the U.S. education system and another passed on orally by her father, who had lived through Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Movement:

> My father was from the generation that was lashed by Jim Crow laws and then brought the civil rights movement to its peak. He was also of the generation in which many African American artists and intellectuals left the United States to find refuge in Mexico.

> He was proud of his heritage and passed it on to me through family stories, Black history lessons he knew I would not get in school, and the repeated reminder that despite what society would lead me to believe Black people made great contributions to civilization and I "did not come from trash." (434)

Jackson's story is not at all dissimilar to that of other Blacks in the Americas. As seen in the Costa Chica of Mexico, Afro descendants have had to preserve their history orally to resist erasure. In Mexico, there is a persistent myth that Blacks do not exist in Mexico like they do in other parts of the world. This myth is combated in the Costa Chica through folklore, poetry, and *versos*. In the United States, the myth that Blacks have not accomplished anything or made any contributions to the United States is combated through oral story telling as well. As Jackson notes, her African American father felt the need to teach her about her Black heritage because he knew that she would not learn about the contributions of African Americans in the U.S. school system. Through oral storytelling, Afro descendants in the Americas combat colonization and refuse to buy into negative images of themselves produced by the dominant, colonial culture.

Moreover, Jackson's story illustrates how Mexico's prejudices are often overlooked because Mexico is imagined to be a "race free" nation in the American psyche. As Jackson shares in her autobiography, her father alongside other "African American artists and intellectuals left the United States to find refuge in Mexico" (434). But the idea that *they* would find refuge in Mexico was disrupted by the fact that Mexico is not a race free nation at all but marred by a legacy of Spanish colonization. As Jackson further shares in her autobiography, in time, her father learned that Mexico was not a racial paradise as he once thought but a country that organized itself around race and anti-Blackness:

> He suspected that the notion that Mexico was completely free of racism was not altogether true, and over time his suspicions were confirmed, sometimes painfully. But he continued to love the country anyway. He loved it as one loves family—warts and all. (434)

Jackson's autobiography illuminates how Americans often romanticize Mexico as a race free paradise and inadvertently support the oppression of marginalized communities resisting erasure and racism in Mexico. In other words, although Mexico is an independent nation that rebelled and successfully fought off Spanish rule in 1821, the structures of racism and colorism remained behind.

As Jackson further shares in her autobiography, there is a prevailing belief even among some Mexican citizens that Mexico is a race free nation. In her own mixed-race family, her mother did not understand why people who did not "look Black" were called Black in the United States:

> My mother loved my father and his family, but she admits that, particularly early in their marriage, she did not always understand how they viewed the world—why race was so important and why everyone in his family, ranging in color from almost white (or "high yellow" in the Black vernacular) to dark brown, was called Black. When I was a small child, my mother used to claim that there was no racism in Mexico—everyone was Mexican. It was not like the United States—obsessed with race and categories. She has now lived in the United States for almost fifty years and says it has taken her decades and raising two "Black" children to better understand the racial dynamics here and to see that even in Mexico, where everyone is Mexican, there is racism too. (435)

Jackson's story brings up the Costa Chica and the politics of race in Mexico and the United States. The United States was subject to the concept of the one-drop rule, which dictated that anyone with one Black ancestor was considered Black for life (Hickman 1163). On the other hand, anyone with a drop of European or Amerindian ancestry in Mexico was considered *not* Black. For these reasons, many Afro-Mexicans in Mexico do not call themselves Black but call themselves *mulattoes* or *morenos* or other racial terms.

The practice of moving away from Blackness is a phenomenon that other scholars have noted in their research. As Bobby Vaughn notes, during his own field work in Mexico in the 1990s, he was met with resistance by Mexicans who claimed that he was looking for Blacks in a country where Blacks did not exist:

> There is a prevailing view in Mexico that blacks don't exist in ways they exist in other countries; that there may be some people with some black ancestry, but they are not pure black. As a dark-skinned African American I was oftentimes used as evidence in this argument. I have been told countless times throughout the country that there are no blacks *like me* in Mexico. One Afro-Mexican went as far as to suggest that in comparison to him, that *my people* were the *true blacks*. Some friends in Mexico City, when I began my work in the mid-1990s, explained to me that the people in the state of Veracruz and the Costa Chica region weren't actually black, but their dark skin (and presumably kinky hair) were the result of their exposure to the harsh sun. These assertions that there are no black Mexicans were often followed by the almost obligatory "we're all mixed in Mexico" which might typically lead to an almost glib statement that "we're all equal in Mexico." ("Mexico Negro" 227)

And indeed, it would be easier for Afro-Mexican scholars, coming from the United States, if Afro-Mexican interviewees simply identified as Black and referred to themselves as Black like many Afro descendants do in the United States. But it is also important to remember that Mexico has been subject to *mestizo* normativity. Asking some Mexicans to identify as Black is akin to asking them to betray their country and to go against the ways in which race and nationalism are structured in Mexico.

As Jackson notes in her autobiography, her Afro-American Mexican identity was subsumed under a brown *costeño* identity when she was in Mexico. She was accepted as being part of the Mexican family, but her African features were seen as exotic and belonging to the margins of Mexico like the coastal towns of the Costa Chica and Veracruz:

> My appearance sometimes caused people to pause briefly. They thought I was Mexican, but I was definitely not from D.F.—maybe a visitor from one of the Mexican coasts such as Veracruz or Guerrero. I was teased. People would talk to me in fake *costeño* accents and I didn't understand why. In retrospect, I can see that they were acknowledging my African features even though they may not have made the connection with Africa. They claimed me as Mexican, but they viewed me as a curiosity that belonged at the periphery of the nation. (435)

Only certain people are seen as being part of the Mexican family, and those who do not look a certain way or even talk a certain way are seen as outsiders at best. As can be seen in Jackson's autobiography, even in Mexico, it is not enough to be Mexican but there are certain regions of Mexico that are seen as more Mexican than others. That is to say, even within the nation, there are regions of Mexico that are celebrated as Mexican par excellence, while other regions like the Costa Chica and Veracruz are hidden from the limelight. As Jackson noted, as a small girl in

Mexico City, those Mexicans residing in the interior of Mexico acted as gatekeepers of Mexican identity. They took it upon themselves to remind a small Black girl that she was Mexican but not *truly* Mexican because of her supposedly *costeño* features that betrayed her supposed coastal identity and thus denied her entry into the brown *mestizo* Mexican family.

Given the constant negotiations with race and nation that Jackson had to make in Mexico, it is no wonder then that she identifies as African American first and Mexican second. In her own autobiography, she refers to herself as an "African American Mexican woman" who has felt both Mexico's "embrace" and its "sting" (435).

Jackson's work reveals how anti-Blackness is embedded into *mestizo* Mexico. From the start, Jackson faced discrimination from Mexicans not because she was an American visiting Mexico City but because she was Black. Her Spanish accent, which most likely resembled her mother's own *chilango* accent, was suddenly transformed into a fake *costeño* accent. Nevermind that Jackson, at this time, had never even visited Veracruz or the Costa Chica. In Jackson's interactions with other Mexicans, one sees how she is categorized and how this *costeño* categorization is one of humiliation and exoticization. Pelaez Lopez's poems reveal how this *costeño*/ *mestizo* binary has serious consequences not only for Mexicans in Mexico but also Mexicans who leave Mexico and migrate.

In the next section, I will be analyzing selected poems from Pelaez Lopez's collection *Intergalactic Travels.* As their work shows, the Mexican education system plays a large role in shaping how Mexicans identify themselves and how they identify others as either belonging or not belonging. Pelaez Lopez is the only writer in this chapter who does not use the term Mexican to identify themselves. Unlike other writers, Pelaez Lopez is specifically from the Costa Chica

and identifies with their African and Native American origins rather than the Mexican country in which they were born.

Section II: Alán Pelaez Lopez, Afro-Zapotec

Pelaez Lopez comes from a different historical experience from that of the other poets and might be described as Afro-Mexican in the sense that the oral poets analyzed in chapter two might be considered Afro-Mexican. Pelaez Lopez, a non-binary Afro-Zapotec poet, engages in a critique of the education they received in the Mexican school system. In this poem I am conflating the lyrical "I" with that of the author. In this sense, I read Pelaez Lopez's work as a *testimonio* rather than purely as a poetry collection with a fictional lyrical "I". As Pelaez Lopez writes in their own words, *Intergalactic Travels* attests to what they have witnessed and experienced as an undocumented migrant in the United States:

> The book is more than just a poetry collection, this book is my testimony. As someone who can still be removed from the U.S. at any moment. I can't assure that whoever is deporting me will actually hear my side of the story, so I have to write it into the archive. The U.S. is obsessed with paper traces, so I am engaging in what they're good at: the manipulation of words, images, and stories. (114)

In essence, Pelaez Lopez envisioned their collection as a cultural artifact that would stay behind in the case that they were ever deported from the United States. *Intergalactic Travels* then is intended to be read as witness testimony of the routes that the author had to take to arrive in the United States and then make their home in the United States as an Afro-Zapotec poet-scholar.

Before reading *Intergalactic Travels* as testimony, it is important to first define what a testimony is and what it has traditionally been used for. As Ian Patel notes, "testimony is seen to provide an "on the ground" perspective, and in this regard has become a key heuristic among researchers in their attempt to understand the experience of conflict" (236). In other words, testimony has a legal function and its purpose is to stand in as witness to first-hand, often traumatic experiences.

Testimonies give validity to an event that has occurred and are commonly used in the courtroom or in legal proceedings. So why use poetry as testimony? And what are the intersections between being a witness and literature? As Shoshana Felman notes, poetry and testimony intersect in that poetry makes known what is still not known by the speaker:

> the very principle of poetic insight and the very core of the event of poetry, which makes precisely language—through its breathless gasps—speak ahead of knowledge and awareness and break through the limits of its own conscious understanding. By its very innovative definition, poetry will henceforth speak beyond its means, to testify—precociously—to the ill-understood effects and to the impact of an accident whose origin cannot precisely be located but whose repercussions, in their very uncontrollable and unanticipated nature, still continue to evolve even in the very process of the testimony. (21)

In other words, what poetry offers testimony is the ability to speak before knowledge. Before knowledge is fully formed and before a concrete understanding of what has occurred is formed, feelings precede knowledge. In this sense, poetry can aid testimony and aid in its crystallization. As will be seen, Pelaez Lopez's employment of gaps in their poetry can be read as moments where information has not been fully crystallized.

Moreover, as Felman and Cathy Caruth have noted in their respective works, the role of the witness is important especially when one takes into consideration that dictators and oppressive regimes have tried to destroy or eliminate certain memories from the archive. In her work with Holocaust survivors Felman notes that each survivor carries with them "the burden of the witness" even if their story aligns with that of other witnesses theirs "is a radically unique, noninterchangeable and solitary burden" (3). For these reasons, primarily this weight that survivors often carry, it is imperative that memories be considered in the archive. As Caruth noted at a conference entitled "The Future of Testimony" in Manchester, England on August 11-12, 2011, her title topic entails precisely not only archiving memories but also looking deeper into the archives and figuring out what has been repressed within the memories that have been archived:

> These disasters are not simply the objects of archives, or objects that call out for archiving; they are also, themselves, unique events whose archives have been repressed or erased, and whose singularity, as events, can be defined by that erasure. They can indeed, themselves be called "archives du mal"—archives of evil (or suffering)—because they not only leave an impression, but hide their impression. They involve evil or suffering, that is, precisely because they hide or prohibit their own memory: because they are themselves "hidden or destroyed, prohibited, repressed." They consist precisely in hiding themselves; they become events insofar as they are, precisely, hidden. (18)

In essence, testimonies, which are memories, have traditionally been archived and not examined for what is written between the lines. As Caruth argues, archivists actually create archives of suffering because the memories which have been written and exposed remained repressed. In reading Pelaez Lopez's work as a testimony, I pay attention to the nuances of language as well as

gaps and that which is left unsaid so as to practice something different from the reproduction of archives of suffering.

One of the ways in which memories are destroyed is that they are written out of the national narrative. As Pelaez Lopez notes in *Intergalactic Travels*, one of the ways in which Mexico's African heritage has been snuffed out is through omission. Pelaez Lopez begins their collection with a section titled "Unknown" to inform their readers of a Mexican history that is generally unknown: Mexico's African heritage. Pelaez Lopez moves into a narrative style that entails a collective "we," speaking back to a singular, dominant "you." The "we" in the poem is imagined as a silenced collective speaking back to Euro-Mexicans, whose history is celebrated at the expense of Afro-Mexicans and Mexico's Amerindian peoples:

> & to think that once, I thought we were lucky
> to trace the maps of our names to sailors and warriors.
> where you found honor,
> we found our owners.
> where you found one-third portuguese, two-thirds spanish,
> we found one-third NDN slave, two-thirds African slave.
> where you found roots,
> we found genocidal routes.
> & to think that once, I thought we were lucky
> to trace the maps of our names to sailors and warriors.
> where you found an archive of extraordinary stories,
> we found our ancestors kidnapped, transported & enslaved
> where you found romantic cities,

we found occupation, plantations and water pollution.

where you found mestizaje,

we found an attempt at total elimination. (7)

Pelaez Lopez's work notes how the Mexican education system plays a large role in instilling *mestizo* normativity. In the poem above, Pelaez Lopez notes that what is largely taught about Mexico to Mexican students prioritizes European contact with Mesoamericans but does not take into consideration the enslaved Africans who were also brought into New Spain and helped form present-day Mexican society. Through the education system, Mexicans are taught that the default Mexican is of Spanish and Native American descent. The collective "we" in this poem gives us a behind the scenes look at an often untold history about Mexico that includes genocide, forced slavery, and settler colonialism. By giving us a glimpse into the Mexican education system, Pelaez Lopez's poem serves as testimony to nation-building projects that begin at the compulsory education level.

As I have stated, I pay attention to the nuances of language as well as gaps and that which is left unsaid. What is left unsaid in this poem is the feeling of betrayal. There is a constant "you" in this poem who is favored over an overshadowed "we." The poem critiques individual accounts of history that are valued over collective memory. As the narrator notes, tales of fantastic cities and daring colonists privilege the narrative of discovery, a narrative that owns knowledge and rationalizes the ownership of people. The feeling of betrayal comes in learning and being made to celebrate a history that is intent on wiping one out. The betrayal comes in learning to love that which seeks to kill one. It is a nasty betrayal. As the narrator notes, "I thought we were lucky." When in reality, the *mestizaje* they learned about masked their "total elimination."

It is through their migration journey that Pelaez Lopez witnesses and experiences the far-reaching powers of *mestizo* Mexico. In their poem "Discovering Blackness," Pelaez Lopez traces their journey from Mexico to the United States. Their painful encounters with school administrators only contribute to a further sense of alienation. As they note, they enter the United States with a Black body and inability to speak English. Already, these two aspects of their identity, Black and non-English speaking, push them further away from the reach of other Latinos residing in the United States, who could help them with their situation. I attach a picture of the poem below instead of typing out the poem here because I am interested in how Pelaez Lopez arranges the poem like a play:

I am nine-years-old
& Mamá Maria tells me que somos negros
I do not believe her
    we have only been in this country for 4 years &
    one thing I know is that only Americans can be Black
    and only Americans can be White
    y yo,
    como puedo ser negro?
    no hablo Inglés, no tengo papeles, mierda no soy Americano

Mamá Maria me dice que somos negros
Mamá Maria tells me that I must learn to love my skin,
    mi piel
    to love my accent,
    mi acento
    to love my culture,
    mi cultura

I do not understand

one year later, bilingual education ends
    (I am shipped to a school 13 miles away)
        (I am labeled Haitian)
        (I am yelled at in French-Creole by an ESL teacher to whom I am her only student)
    (*I do not understand*)
            (c'est garçon est tres stupid)
                (she whispers to another teacher)

I do not understand / I do not understand / I do not understand / I do not understand / I do not understand / I do not understand / I do not understand / I do not understand / I do not understand / I do not understand / I do not understand / I do not understand / I do not understand / I do not

that night, I cry in the bathroom until Mamá Maria comes home from cleaning houses
    I tell her I hate my new school
    I hate the way mademoiselle looks at me
    I hate the way kids pull my hair
    I hate being the only immigrant
    el unico illegal

    I can see the water in Mamá's eyes
    "somos negros" Mamá Maria tells me,
    "pero no le puedes decir a nadie de dónde somos
    porque nos deportaran, y si nos deportan,
    por ser negros, nos van a matar."

Figure 5: Poem by Pelaez Lopez

In the first half of the poem, their mother introduces Blackness to the narrator, in the middle of the poem the narrator experiences what it is like to be a Black immigrant in the United States, and in the end, the narrator understands the danger that entails being Black and an immigrant in the United States. Specifically, the narrator is bused away from home and placed under the exclusive care of a Haitian teacher, whose sole job is to teach them English. As the narrator notes, being bused to another school away from home constitutes another forced migration. It is under the supposed care of this Haitian teacher that the narrator discovers what it is like to be Black in the United States. The narrator is called stupid and verbally assaulted so often that they end up understanding and learning French.

At the surface level, it is clear that Pelaez Lopez is placed in an English as a Second Language (ESL) class for Haitian immigrants because they are racialized as a Black, non-English speaking pupil. But what is left unspoken? What is left unspoken is that *costeños* must often rely on their own oral, historical memories to make sense of their identities. Most *costeños* at one point or another will leave Mexico, but they carry with them their oral history. In this poem, Black identity is passed on from the lips of the narrator's mother to the narrator themself. It is in the United States that they "Discover Blackness"; but it is also in the United States that their mother tells them they are Black. In this sense, the *cimarrona*, celebrated in the world of the *costeño* poetry, instructs her child in the ways of Blackness to ensure their survival.

Although Pelaez Lopez's poetic voice is living miles away from the Costa Chica, the *cimarrona* mother carries with her strategies of survival, sharpened long ago in the Costa Chica, and passes them onto her child for survival. Their *cimarrona* mother instructs them to love their skin, accent, and culture. These are strategies that *costeños* have historically used to survive even within Mexico.

These strategies—orality, poetry, and love—prove to carry the narrator. At the end of their collection, Pelaez Lopez poses solutions and strategies for resisting erasure that no longer depend on dominant discourse. There is a strong contrast between their first poem "Unknown" and their last poem "An Artist Manifesto for Black & or Indigenous Folk Surviving Empire." "Unknown" is marked by a sense of betrayal, a sense of abandonment by the dominant, national narrative. "An Artist Manifesto" is marked by a sense of independence. The narrator no longer looks to dominant discourses for their own liberation but begins to learn about and discover indigenous ways of knowledge. In "An Artist Manifesto," Pelaez Lopez argues that in order for Black and Amerindian folk to resist empire they must be able to create their own narratives and own histories:

> I believe in the Ghanaian concept of *Sankofa*: we must always go back and get that which we have lost. What we have lost as African-diasporic, as Indigenous people, as queer people, as trans people, and as undocumented people is memory.
>
> We have lost our memory
>
> Slavery, Indigenous genocide, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, anti-Blackness, patriarchy among hundreds of oppressive structures all have one thing in common: they work to uphold capitalism and White supremacy by making marginalized people forget who they are. (99)

In other words, Pelaez Lopez insists that one of the ways in which Afro diasporic and Amerindian people can resist is by sharing their memories. By sharing their memories, they will disrupt post-colonial narratives which continue to have far reaching consequences up to the present. Similarly, to *costeños* in the Costa Chica, Pelaez Lopez challenges the state sanctioned archive by telling their story, and in telling their story, they also tell the stories of millions of

Afro-Mexicans who have been silenced. But what is left unspoken? What is left unspoken is the realization that the colonizer's knowledge is not needed to survive. It is only by rejecting that which rejects one that the narrator finds freedom and finds a treasure of knowledge. It is through disengaging from state-sanctioned discourses that the narrator truly discovers Blackness and an abundance of African and Native American pathways of knowledge.

The African branch of knowledge that the narrator chooses is also interesting. It is a branch of knowledge that encourages its practitioners to return to the past. Note too, that it is only by going into the past that they are freed from current, dominant discourses. It is their *cimarrona* mother's gift of oral memory that allows them to retrieve ancestral knowledge to survive in the present. As Christel N. Temple notes, the concept of *Sankofa* comes from the Akan people in Ghana who use pictorial communicators to transmit knowledge, wisdom, and history among one another (127). *Sankofa* is represented by a bird with its feet facing forward and its head reaching back to retrieve an egg.[12] Below I attach a pictorial representation of *Sankofa*:

Figure 6: Pictorial representation of Sankofa

[12] (Sankofa - Black Cultural Festival)

Intergalactic Travels ends with a call for indigenous and Afro diasporic peoples to take back their memory. Taking back one's memories of course entails going back and learning from the elders and learning from oral history. In essence, Pelaez Lopez centers Black and Amerindian people and their ways of knowledge in their writing.

By centering Ghanaian strategies of resistance, Pelaez Lopez is going back and retrieving knowledge from their West African ancestors. And by engaging in testimony as a strategy of resistance, Pelaez Lopez is joining the ranks of Afro-Mexicans in Oaxaca and Guerrero who have had to write their own histories and own stories to survive erasure.

Pelaez Lopez's work details the life of an undocumented *costeño* surviving empire in the United States and their struggles and realization of their both Black and *Zapotec* identities. Like other individual works it helps us to understand the unique nature of what might be termed Afro-Mexican literary expression in the United States. Moreover, their poetry details how the education systems in the United States and Mexico reproduce race and empire. Even though Pelaez Lopez is a Mexican immigrant when they enter the United States, they are classified as Haitian and spoken to in French. Through a critique of the education system, Pelaez Lopez interrogates how race is taught and reproduced. In the next section, Ariana Brown's poetry examines how *mestizo* normativity is reproduced in the home.

Section III: Ariana Brown, Black Mexican American

Ariana Brown's profile differs from María Rosario Jackson's and Alán Pelaez Lopez's. She is the only writer in this chapter who uses the racial term Black and ethnic term Mexican American to identify herself. Rosario Jackson, who was raised by an African American father

and Mexican mother as seen in section one, refers to herself as an African American Mexican woman. She identifies with the sum of her African American and Mexican experiences. And Pelaez Lopez, who was raised by a single, immigrant, *costeña* mother in the United States as seen in section two, refers to themselves as an Afro-Zapotec writer. Even though they were born in Mexico, they do not refer to themselves as Mexican or Mexican American, but rather, they identify with their Native American ancestors. The terms that these writers of African descent use point to their parents or heritages.

Brown's collections *Sana Sana* (2020) and *We are Owed* (2021) can be read as a reclaiming of the Black and Mexican American heritages she was constantly pulled away from. In *Sana Sana*, Brown details how her Mexican American family conformed to *mestizo* normativity, despite living in Texas. Although Brown's father was an African American man, who passed away before his daughter's birth, Brown's family attempted to assimilate Brown into a homogenous identity of *mestizo* Mexico that suppressed her Black heritage.

The poem in *Sana Sana* titled "Invocation" questions the ethos of a *mestizo* normativity that can only function if Mexicans and Mexican Americans look a certain way and blend into the *mestizo* family unit. Without naming the oral poetry of the Costa Chica and perhaps without being conscious of it, Brown echoes the sentiments of many Afro-Mexican *costeños* in the Costa Chica who are often excluded and face intrafamilial violence for not being fair-skinned or for not having "manageable" hair. "Invocation" details how her 4c curly hair pattern posed a problem for her family of predominantly straight-haired women:

> you were once teenage purveyor of the white girl gospel—
> zealous pupil of the hot comb, of oily neck and folded ear,
> but before that, you were young. you were asked questions

about your dead father and your hair. your first conversation
with god, faithless. child of the singing forehead. child of the
frustrated wrist. your mother yelled because you fell asleep
on your aunt's pillows and now the whole couch smells of you.
child of amorous pomade. everyone can tell where you've been.
even bus windows remember your name. child of the curl that
stole the wind's fury. how could everything about you not be
bursting? child of the busted chongo. child of the broken brush,
splitting anything weak in half while still blushing for a gentle
hand
[...]
tell us how you learned to fix, fluff, and plait; to wind and plow.
how you were late to class and work doing so. how you skipped
breakfast. how you tended. how you greeted a new ancestor
[...]
unlike anything else in the world, when smothered in water,
submerged in a substance thick enough to kill you, nearly
drowned and gasping–you rise, and refusing invisibility,
grow to the size all benevolent gods are. (*Sana Sana* 17)

Brown's poem can be read as a coming-of-age poem. This intimacy is reflected in the form of the poem. Note that all the words are written in lowercase. As Edith Zimmerman notes, "typing in lowercase signals familiarity [….] lowercase text can read as honest, unedited, and approaching something like a stream of consciousness—more like actual speech" ("13 reasons").

In the beginning of the poem, she tries to blend into the "white girl gospel." The white girl gospel can be interpreted as the alleged true and *correct* way to act and be. After the words "white girl gospel," Brown moves to a scene where her ears are folded and her neck is oiled so as to achieve straight hair and resemble the straight-haired women in her family. One can infer that these hair relaxing practices are being carried out for the benefit of Brown's mother rather than Brown herself. After all, Brown's mother is the one who is depicted as being physically tired with "frustrated wrist." It is in this scene too that *mestizo* normativity becomes most evident. Instead of learning how to manage her daughter's 4c hair texture, Brown's mother uses brushing techniques that are damaging to her daughter's hair. Brown's mother expects her to conform to "Mexican American" hair brushing techniques and styles somehow, someway, rather than learning how to brush and care for Afro-textured hair. Through this domestic scene, Brown shows readers how features such as 4c curly hair, which are African features, are repressed violently in favor of homogeneity. Brown's hair must be straight because everyone else in the family has straight hair. There is no room for difference. And that which does not conform is violently brushed out.

It is only when Brown, at the age of twelve, learns how to style her own hair that the yelling stops. It is also important to note that Brown does not learn how to style her hair in ways that would call attention to her curly hair. At this age, at the age of twelve, one can infer that she has been socialized to mask her curly hair. It is only when she learns to hide her hair that her hair is no longer tugged at violently.

As Brown learns how to tame her hair, her African ancestors begin communicating with her. The fact that she is communicating with her African ancestors is evident in the words "plow" and "wind." These are images associated with working out in the field, where enslaved

African Americans were often made to work and where having loose hair can be a hindrance and a potential hazard, especially if dealing with heavy machinery. In essence, like her African American ancestors before her, Brown learns to tame her hair and to keep it out of the way to avoid further abuse. In the home, she begins to learn that being herself is dangerous and can invite violence.

The poem illustrates how white supremacy tactics such as being forced to straighten one's hair need not be forcibly carried out by white people or even strangers but occur within the intimate confines of the home at the hands of one's own family members. In this poem, texturism is reinforced not by white dominant oppressors but by Mexican American sub-oppressors, who have themselves learned to conform in order to be accepted.

Towards the end of the poem, Brown reframes what she has been forced to do to her hair and ends by saying that she has had to tame her hair because it is supernatural. Her hair defies the laws of physics. Rather than shrink when it is submerged in water, it expands and refuses to be invisible. At the end, it can be inferred that Brown realizes the power of her hair. Although her African American heritage was not celebrated in her home, Brown's collections *Sana Sana* and *We are Owed* shows how she used her intersectional identities—Black and Mexican American—to make space for herself.

Brown shifts from narrating her own experiences to narrating those of the larger African diaspora in her poem "Don't Know Nobody from Ellis Island," from *We are Owed*. Brown disrupts post-colonial versions of Mexican history by interjecting the stories of African explorers such as Esteban, who accompanied Spaniards to the "New World" and made the colonization of the Americas possible.

In “Don’t Know Nobody from Ellis Island,” the speaker narrates meeting her elementary school classmate Guillermo, a dark, migrant Mexican. From the start, the narrator is shocked at the darkness of Guillermo’s skin, and it is only by going back in time and learning about the story of Africans in Mexico that Guillermo’s skin stops shocking the narrator and becomes understandable given the African diaspora in Mexico:

guillermo was
the darkest mexican i’d ever met
& my exiled hair was a harbor
we both could have moored in
& i did not know how to lift my
silent lip & smile. i only knew he
was annoying […]
i did not see Esteban
prince of conquest pouring sand
into my blood esteban who survived
the ocean twice & left behind no
images of himself instead was forced
to give the spaniards a key to the world
above the river & this crossing
is where i begin.
were your ancestors immigrants
or slaves did they read the signs *no niggers*

mexicans or dogs allowed were they assumed

to be rich were they rich did they own themselves

did they have to work for their freedom? (*We Are Owed* 41)

Esteban was an enslaved Moor from Morocco who was forced to join the Narváez expedition, which set out from Cuba to Florida in 1528 (Goodwin). It eventually covered 2,000 miles and ended in a Spanish settlement in Sinaloa, Mexico in 1536 (Goodwin). In the poetic scene above, it is only once the speaker realizes that Guillermo is most likely of Afro-Mexican descent that he stops appearing exotic and annoying.

If the poem were to be broken up into two parts, one would depict Guillermo as an annoyingly dark Mexican who was too much and needed too much from the speaker. The other half would depict Guillermo as a dark, immigrant Mexican who interrupted the narrator's conversation because he was bursting with questions and curiosity about the place he had just migrated to.

The story that is being told here is that lack of historical awareness can translate into contempt for people who are excluded from history. It is only when Guillermo's history is recounted that the narrator seems to gain compassion for Guillermo and starts to view him as a descendant of a people who have continuously faced exclusion in the Americas.

Although Guillermo's story is fictional, it mirrors Pelaez Lopez's own struggles to fit in with their classmates and find a place in the United States. "Don't Know Nobody from Ellis Island" shows that history can either breed compassion or contempt. In order for Afro-Mexicans to be accepted within their own communities, a retelling of Mexican history is crucial. As can be seen through this poem, Guillermo is an odd figure in the diaspora because he is dark and does not fit into the narrative of *mestizo* Mexico. Guillermo is not bronze skinned. He is dark. Too

dark. That is, Guillermo does not fit *mestizo* normativity. It is only when the narrator examines Guillermo's history that he is humanized in the poem and stops being an annoying Afro-Mexican who needs too much.

Brown's poem about Guillermo raises the question as to why Africans do not make up a larger part of Mexican American or Mexican studies. She continues interrogating forms of *mestizo* normativity in her collection *We are Owed* by calling attention to the image and legacy of Gaspar Yanga in colonial Veracruz, Mexico. Her poem "Yanga Explains" guesses at what Yanga—a self-liberated West African prince who led a maroon colony of self-emancipated West Africans in the highlands of Veracruz, Mexico—would say to Ariana Brown and to a larger extent Afro-Mexican people who are searching for their identity:

> *I am here, mijita, but I cannot stay.*
> *When you are ready, I'll send a boat.*
> *Don't pack your bags yet, you've still*
> *got learning to do. I'll be back.*
> *I want to know you looked for me.*
> *Mijita, never stop looking*.[13] (*We Are Owed* 64)

The relationship between Brown and Yanga is depicted as a daughter-father relationship in the poem but it can also be interpreted as a call for the visibility of Afro-Mexican stories. Yanga uses the word *mijita* to refer to Brown, which affectionately means my little daughter in English. By establishing this imagined father-daughter relationship, Brown is acknowledging that she is an inheritor of an Afro-Mexican history due to the fact that she is a Black and Mexican American woman. Even though Brown's father is actually an African American man born and raised in the

[13] Italics are in the original

United States, Brown's Mexican ancestry also points her to Mexico. Afro-Mexican history also belongs to her. It is her inheritance. In this sense, we can see Brown, the writer, inheriting a history that is rightfully hers by virtue of being of African and of *mestiza* descent. This is how I interpret Brown's poetry title *We are Owed*. She is pointing to a history that is owed to Afro-Mexicans in the diaspora. They are owed their history and their place in Mexican society and abroad.

Moreover, "Yanga Explains" shows that Afro-Mexicans—in the sense in which the term might be used by some like Brown in the United States—are not cut off from Mexico but are sustained by stories of radical Mexican figures such as Gaspar Yanga, who went to war with Spanish soldiers for Afro-Mexicans' freedom. Yanga is a figure who shows that the ideas of liberty, freedom, and undeniable rights entered the Americas not only by way of the colonizing European but also and perhaps even more so through the enslaved African. Africans brought notions of liberty, equality, and egalitarianism to the Americas that could not have been instilled in them by European colonizers—who were invested in convincing them that they were less than human—but by teachings that they brought from their African cultures. In Brown's poem, Yanga serves as a metaphorical midwife to Brown's desires for Black freedom.

As Ryan Hope Travis notes, Gaspar Yanga founded a sustainable maroon society at a time when freed Black Towns in the Americas were almost non-existent. Moreover, Yanga went a step further and negotiated perpetual freedom not only for himself but his maroon community and their descendants:

> The Maroon society's military prowess was undeniable. After 9 years of intermittent battle, the Spaniards were unsuccessful in capturing Yanga and his Palenque. […] With the death of Yanga's war captain, Yanga sent the Spaniards a list of 11 stipulations for

> peace. Yanga demanded freedom for all those living in his community prior to September 1608. Those who joined the palenque after that date would be returned to their "masters." Yanga also demanded that the community be given the status of a free town and have its own cabildo, an administrative council that governs the municipality. Furthermore, a Spanish layman serving as justicia mayor would be the only Spaniard permitted in the town. All other Spaniards were to be excluded, except on market days. […] Additionally, Yanga demanded that his descendants assume the role of governor after his tenure. In 1618, Spanish authorities accepted Yanga's conditions, and shortly thereafter, the free Black town of San Lorenzo de los Negros de Cerralvo was created. (2)

In essence, Yanga and his group of followers fought so that Africans could enjoy perpetual freedom rather than slavery. Despite Yanga's valiant efforts, his story, and the stories of the soldiers he fought alongside, have been all but overshadowed in present-day Mexican and Mexican American studies courses. Brown's signaling to Yanga could be interpreted as a way of saying that she, an Afro-Mexican woman living in the diaspora, has not forgotten the right to liberty, inclusion, and democracy that all Afro-Mexicans have. Brown ends her poem by imagining that Gaspar Yanga will be back to take her home with other freed Black Mexicans.

The three poems I have selected from Brown's poetry collections *Sana Sana* and *We are Owed*— "Invocation," "Don't Know Nobody from Ellis Island," and "Yanga Explains"—show the narrator, who is often Brown's own voice, transform from a little girl being beaten and made to feel less than for having "unmanageable" hair to a woman coming to terms with her dual African American and Mexican American heritage. Although Brown was raised in Texas, her poetry constantly looks back to Mexico and to powerful African figures in Mexico and the present-day U.S. Southwest like Gaspar Yanga and Esteban. Although Esteban may not seem

powerful right off the bat, he was after all an enslaved Moroccan who was forced to serve in Narváez expedition, he was a Black traveler and explorer in the Americas. Often the stories of white men exploring the world are told, but the Black and brown men who made these journeys possible are pushed off to the sidelines. It is by going back to that broader African American history (as in the continent of America not just the United States of America) that Brown advances the voices of Afro-Mexicans in Mexico and the United States. It is through history and a recuperation of Mexico's African heritage that Brown makes a home for herself.

Brown does not allow herself to be torn in half, and she does not choose between her African American and Mexican American heritage. In plain terms, Brown is saying that Africans and Mexicans have been mixing since colonial times. There is nothing to choose between what is already mixed.

In Summary

Although the writers mentioned in this chapter come from vastly different backgrounds, they exemplify the far-reaching consequences of *mestizo* normativity. They also exemplify that it is not advisable to be reductive about Afro-Mexican identity. Not all those who may think of themselves as—or who may, because of socio-political perceptions, be thought of as—Afro-Mexican have immediate geographical connections with the Mexican coast. As Jackson notes, her own Mexican mother denied that racism existed in Mexico and claimed that in Mexico everyone was the same. It is only when she has a racially mixed African American Mexican child that the spell of *mestizaje* starts to break down.

By telling their stories, the writers in this chapter show that *mestizo* normativity is not at all normal but may only appear normal because it is discursively enforced. As Pelaez Lopez notes, one of the ways that *mestizo* normativity is maintained is through the education system. From a young age, young Mexican boys and girls learn that they are *mestizos*. Brown's poetry shows that the *mestizo* norm is further reinforced in the home. In her home, Brown notes that she learned that her Black body and African features invited violence to her body. It is in the Mexican American home that she learns to shrink and submit to homogenous ideas of *mestizaje*. These poems show that *mestizaje* is enforced through threats of and actual experiences of violence and exclusion. By telling their stories, these writers show that *mestizo* normativity is not a default nor ideal but rather one out of many Mexican identities.

In the next and final chapter, I argue that Afro-Mexican writers in Mexico use social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube to disrupt *mestizo* normativity at a global scale.

Chapter Four: Afro-Mexican Activism and Scholarship Through the Lens of Three Contemporary Afro-Mexican Writers

En México hay talento, solo falta apoyarlo

There is talent in Mexico, we just need to support it –Mexican proverb.

Afro-Mexican history cannot be interpreted or read through a straight line. It is as diverse and varied as Afro-Mexicans themselves. Afro-Mexicans in both Mexico and the U.S. Southwest have suppressed or highlighted parts of their identity at different points in history to survive. Despite this diversity, Afro-Mexican works are primarily interpreted through a normative *mestizo* lens. In this chapter, I argue that Afro-Mexican writers must first challenge *mestizo* normativity before their works can be accepted as works connected with the African diaspora. The unique challenge that Afro-Mexican writers face in Mexico is having to prove their existence and identity.

In this chapter, I examine how contemporary writers Aleida Violeta Vázquez Cisneros, Abel Emigdio Baños Delgado, and Filemón Silva Sandoval use social media to promote their written works and challenge readings that depict Mexico as a Black-free space.

For my methodology, I rely on my field notes and interviews from Mexico City, Cuernavaca, Oaxaca, and video interviews, which I conducted with writers, filmmakers, and artists from April 2022 to December 2022.

During my trip to Mexico in April 2022, I had the pleasure of sitting down and meeting with Silva Sandoval, Baños Delgado, and Vázquez Cisneros. During our interviews, it became

increasingly clear that Mexico lacks spaces dedicated to Afro-Mexican writers. Due to this lack of infrastructure, these writers are taking matters into their own hands and publishing themselves or promoting themselves to readers and scholars who have an interest in Afro-Mexican literature.

Filemón Silva Sandoval's Story

I came across Silva Sandoval's collection of short stories and ballads *Lej voy a cantá un corrido, Costa Chica: cuentos de la negrada, la raíz olvidada* (2015) through a blog post titled *El debate pinotepa*, which also served as an independent newspaper outlet for the city of Santiago Pinotepa Nacional, Oaxaca. The blog post has since been deleted and moved to Facebook under the same name. In order to get a copy of Silva Sandoval's collection, I contacted the editor of the *El debate pinotepa*, Antonio Clavel Ramírez, and he immediately sent me a copy of Silva Sandoval's book. I share Filemón Silva Sandoval's story to show readers that it is often not easy to access a book by an Afro-Mexican writer. Most Afro-Mexican works are not available online and they are accessible only by reaching out to short-staffed bookstores in the Costa Chica. These shopkeepers must then incur the costs of traveling to a postal office, waiting in line, and filling out foreign shipping labels. Thankfully, after hearing about my research project, Clavel Ramírez was more than willing to help me and he has continued to find and ship books for my research when and if he can.

When I finally visited Cuernavaca, Mexico and sat down with Silva Sandoval for an interview, I was shocked to find that hundreds of copies of his work *Lej voy a cantá un corrido* were stacked in a corner of his office gathering dust. When I asked him why he was not selling his books, his response was that he could not find any publishing houses to print his books or to

sell them. After digging a bit deeper, I learned that Silva Sandoval's son, Oscar Silva Sandoval, paid for 200 copies of his father's short story and ballad collection to be printed and bound. Since Silva Sandoval was told by countless publishers that they would not publish his work, he decided to self-publish and try to sell the collection on his own. His wife Rosy "Rikki" Silva, who also believes in the collection, edited her husband's work during her free time, and in 2015, his collection was finally printed and bound and hit the markets. But bookstore after bookstore rejected his collection. There were a few bookstores in the Costa Chica that saw the value of his book and immediately agreed to buy a few copies and that is how I came to be in possession of Silva Sandoval's poetry collection.

Although it might appear unusual for an academic researcher to suggest the value of a work rejected by publishing houses in Mexico, my particular knowledge of the Costa Chica, its mannerism, customs, dialects, and ways of being led me to learn that Silva Sandoval's work is worthy of academic study. In particular, his short story "Locura" in *Lej voy a cantá un corrido,* portrays what Guillermo Bonfil Batalla and other critics such as Rick López in his work *Crafting Mexico* (2010) and Pedro Palou in his work *El fracaso del mestizo* have noted as a split between the imaginary, aspirational Mexico, and *México profundo* (real Mexico).

As Bonfil Batalla notes, the resistance between *México profundo* and imaginary Mexico can be seen in the lack of racial mixture among the dominant classes. While there is racial mixture among the majority in Mexico, there is less racial mixture and less traces of Amerindian ancestry among the dominant classes in Mexico:

> The predominance of Indian traits in the majority sectors of the population and their much lower frequency in the dominant classes indicates that racial fusion did not occur in a uniform fashion and that we are far from being the racial democracy that is often

> proclaimed. The racial differences are a basic historical fact that indicates the most profound aspect of our reality during the last five centuries. A colonial society was established whose nature made it necessary to distinguish subject populations from those who were dominant. This distinction was indispensable and included racial differences. The colonial order was based ideologically on affirmation of the superiority of the dominant society over those colonized, in all terms of comparison, including racial ones. (16)

In essence, Bonfil Batalla argues that Mexican society is not a nation where racial mixture takes place at the same rate across all social classes but that dominant, elite Mexicans still work to differentiate themselves from Mexico's Amerindians, a colonized people, to justify their supposed racial superiority.

Although Bonfil Batalla focuses primarily on the exclusion of Mexico's Native Americans, this same exclusion and rejection from the dominant classes transfers to Mexico's Afro-Mexican population. In "Locura," which literally translates to madness, Silva Sandoval critiques Mexico's dominant class by creating a short story that illustrates the schizophrenia and madness that marks the dominant classes in Mexico City.

"Locura" is narrated through the lens of an omniscient narrator. The story's young, white, female protagonist is haunted by the dreams that she has of her imaginary Afro-Mexican lover Yanga. The point of this story is that there is no Black lover. The narrator believes that the Black man she sees in the calendar is real and begins to daydream about him until she goes mad.

The short story details the life of this unnamed female protagonist whose chief activities include masturbating to the advertisement of a Black man in a calendar, working at her boring government job in Mexico City, and attending family reunions on Sunday. On the surface, her

life appears to be boring and pathetic, but her dreams and fears are actually very interesting.

Through a series of flashbacks, the omniscient narrator reveals that the protagonist belongs to the powerful, fictional Estévez-Moctezuma family, which once ruled Pinotepa Nacional, Oaxaca. In the short story, the Estévez-Moctezuma family was run out of Pinotepa Nacional, Oaxaca by *cimarrones* who rebelled and declared the Costa Chica their own. The protagonist's enslaving background creates a strong contrast to her desires for Black men. Through the short story, the protagonist seems to feel guilty about her desires. She details how her father and grandfather routinely sexually abused and raped enslaved Afro-Mexican women on their wedding night. These rapes, which were sanctified under the *derecho de pernada*, ultimately led to a revolt by the enslaved men and women on the plantation.

Given her family's hatred for Blacks for rebelling and running the family out of Pinotepa Nacional, the protagonist is split between her own sexual desires for Black men and her own family's history. This tear between her family's admonition against Black people and her own carnal desires cause her to go mad. In the following description the reader can see how the family is "disgraced" and falls from being a powerful land-owning, enslaving family in Pinotepa Nacional to a working-class family in Mexico City:

> Su tía, su hermana y su cuñado no escatimaban esfuerzos tratando de penetrar en su mente, en sus pensamientos más íntimos, querían saber de su vida sentimental, de sus amores íntimos—si es qué los había—de sus planes a futuro. En ese mismo tenor, efectuaban complicadas maniobras verbales, tratando de introducirse en sus más recónditos pensamientos, intentando sacarle alguna confidencia, aunque casi convencidos los tres de que no había gran cosa oculta a su escudriñamiento de todos los domingos y más bien con el insano afán de comprobar que todo permanecía igual en torno a ella, que

la rutina que la condenaba a desplazarse de su departamento a la vetusta oficina de gobierno donde trabajaba no había cambiado, ni tenía visos de cambiar, lo que le daba a todos ellos la necesaria tranquilidad de estar cumpliendo cabalmente con la responsabilidad que la tragedia familiar les había delegado, no existía en ellos la menor sospecha de lo que con tanto celo ella guardaba, dispuesta como estaba, a no permitir jamás, bajo ninguna circunstancia, que ellos conocieran su secreto, su gran secreto. (52)

Her aunt, sister and brother-in-law spared no effort in trying to penetrate her mind, her innermost thoughts, they wanted to know about her sentimental life, her intimate lovers - if there were any- her plans for the future. In the same vein, they carried out complicated verbal maneuvers, trying to get into her innermost thoughts, trying to extract some confidences from her, although the three of them were almost convinced that there was nothing much hidden from their scrutiny every Sunday and rather with the insane eagerness to verify that everything remained the same around her, that the routine that condemned her to move from her apartment to the old government office where she worked had not changed, nor did it have any signs of changing, which gave all of them the necessary peace of mind that they were fully complying with the responsibility that the family tragedy had delegated to them, there was not the slightest suspicion in them of what she guarded so zealously, willing as she was, to never, under any circumstances, allow them to know her secret, her great secret.

On the surface, it may seem like the protagonist's aunt, sister, and brother-in-law are being nosy and prying into her love life as most family members do at family gatherings, but when one considers the context and standing that this family is used to having, one can infer that they are hoping for her to land a wealthy man at her government job. Although the narrator does not

reveal how this family ended up relocating to Mexico City and the nature of their work in the Mexican government, it is a bit comical that members of the family view going to work as a tragedy they must put up with. It is in little moments like this that the narrator pokes fun at past enslavers in the Costa Chica. Moreover, these jabs illuminate that the landholding class will always view equality and fairness as a "tragedy" and fall from grace. These moments of clarity in Silva Sandoval's stories force readers to reckon with the fact that equality translates to "oppression" for classes which have not had to consider the needs of those they oppress or work for that matter.

As the short story progresses, the protagonist reveals that she wants a romantic partner; but that the Black partner that she wants and desires would never be approved of by her family. Her desire for Black men is interrupted by fears of what her family and other people would say if they ever caught her with a Black man:

> ¿Qué diría la tía cuando se enterara de su huida? ¿Y su hermana…y Federico su cuñado? ¿Y sus pocos amigos de la oficina donde trabajaba? Le preocupaba lo que dirían todos los que la conocían cuando se enteraran: "mira nada más, ella tan modosita, tan dueña de sí misma, tan discreta. Y perdió la cabeza al punto de seguirlo." (58)
>
> What would her aunt say when she found out she had run away? And her sister...and Federico, her brother-in-law? And her few friends at the office where she worked? She was worried about what everyone who knew her would say when they found out, "Look at her, so modest, so self-possessed, so discreet. And she lost her mind to the point of following him."

Silva Sandoval points out that the color line is enforced not through lack of natural desire for other races but by shame. In essence, his story critiques the separation of races as unnatural. He

points out how racism is sustained through malevolent gossip and goes against human nature. In other words, something as simple as gossip is exposed as a weapon of white supremacy. Moreover, Silva Sandoval shows how the color line is enforced through the manipulation of women's desires. Women must first be convinced that reproducing with Black men is "shameful" so that the Black race is wiped out.

Accepting her fate, the protagonist decides to live her days out in delusion and goes brain dead at the end of the short story. Through his works Silva Sandoval critiques *mestizo* Mexico and points out that equality or thoughts of equality cannot come from those who will always view their inability to enslave others as a form of oppression in itself. There are those who truly believe that not all humans are created equal, and those who cannot believe in this kind of world end up going mad.

Abel Emigdio Baños Delgado's Story

Even though Silva Sandoval has not been backed by a publishing house, there are Afro-Mexican writers who have been able to get published and paid for their works. Abel Emigdio Baños Delgado is one of a handful of writers in the Costa Chica who has achieved commercial success inside and outside the Costa Chica. When I visited him in his home in Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca, I asked him how he was able to publish so many poetry collections when the writers I had interviewed and studied had published one or two collections at most. Baños Delgado shared with me that he was among one of the fortunate group of writers who was considered a living library by the Oaxaca's *Secretaría de las Culturas y Artes de Oaxaca*. When Bonfil Batalla's group of researchers, discussed in chapter one, ventured into the Costa Chica to collect folklore

and poetry, many researchers such as Malinali Meza Herrera and Enrique Valencia Valencia walked away from the project believing that Mexico's Afro-Mexican heritage was on the brink of cultural extinction. These researchers, whether they intended to or not, actually opened the doors for Afro-Mexican writers like Abel Emigdio Baños Delgado, Tomás Serrano Coronado, and Israel Reyes Larrea to obtain funds so that they could publish their works and finally become known at an international level.

Despite renewed interest in Afro-Mexican literature, Baños Delgado shared with me that there are fewer and fewer opportunities for Afro-Mexican writers to publish. Because of these limited publishing opportunities, Baños Delgado has also taken to social media to promote his own works. His Facebook page doubles as his site for unpublished poetry. On Facebook, he often publishes poetry and the comments under his poems show that his work continues to instill pride in the inhabitants of the Costa Chica. In his poem "Orgullo Negro" (2019), published via Facebook, Baños Delgado celebrates the inclusion of Afro-Mexicans in the Mexican Constitution:

Con arrebato y contento;
saturado de alegría;
en esta ocasión y día
disparo mi sentimiento,
para que lo lleve el viento
con positiva actitud
y llegue con prontitud
hasta Huehuetán, Guerrero,
donde un encuentro coplero
sostendrá la negritud.

Que sea como una inyección
de querencia, de entusiasmo
y les sacuda el marasmo,
que como una maldición,
pervive en el corazón
aún en el pueblo negro;
como un nocivo reintegro,

With rapture and contentment;
saturated with joy;
on this occasion and day
I send my sentiment,
to be carried by the wind
with positive attitude
and arrives promptly
to Huehuetán, Guerrero,
where a poet
will sustain the negritude.

May it be like an injection
of love, of enthusiasm
and shake off the marasmus,
that like a curse,
that lingers in the heart
even in the Black village;
as a harmful reinstatement,

que dejó la esclavitud
y provoca laxitud
como una cara de suegro.

Hay que sentirse orgullosos
por ser de negro color;
presumirlo con amor,
complacidos y gozosos;
sentirse siempre garbosos
del origen africano;
ver al otro como hermano
con respeto y humildad
y obtengamos la unidad
como pueblo mexicano.

that left slavery
and causes laxity
like a father-in-law's face.

It is necessary to feel proud
for being of black color;
to boast it with love,
pleased and joyful;
to feel always proud
of African origin;
to see the other as a brother
with respect and humility
and let us achieve unity
as Mexican people.

Unlike writers seen in chapter two, Baños Delgado does not hide the fact that slavery was practiced in the Costa Chica. He very staunchly states that the stain of slavery has left the Costa Chica in a state of stagnation, but I do want to add here that it is not *costeños* themselves who are to be blamed for the destitute conditions of the Costa Chica. To take a case in point, Guerrero, one of the states which makes up the Costa Chica, suffers from poverty due to lack of social services. As researchers Guadalupe Olivia Ortega Ramírez, Naú Silverio Niño Gutiérrez, and Miguel Ángel Cruz Vicente note in their work "Marginación en el estado de Guerrero" (2022), the people of Guerrero are destitute because of their race and low levels of education:

> Guerrero es un Estado que se encuentra en desventaja en cuanto al desarrollo económico y social, sin hacer de lado sus bajos niveles de educación, pero, además, estas elevaciones de pobreza están marcadas por la etnia, la discapacidad, y por la falta de acceso a los servicios sociales; lo que nos permite recalcar que en el año 2018 el 66.6 porciento de la población de la entidad vivió en situación de pobreza, mientras que en el 2020 este porcentaje se incrementó al 69.8 %. Considerando que la media nacional se encuentra en 41.9%, Guerrero la viene superando en un 25 % en pobreza. (277)

> Guerrero is a state that is at a disadvantage in terms of economic and social development, not to mention its low levels of education, but in addition to this, these elevations of poverty are marked by ethnicity, disability, and lack of access to social services; which allows us to highlight that in 2018, 66.6 percent of the population lived in poverty, while in 2020 this percentage increased to 69.8 percent. Considering that the national average is 41.9%, Guerrero has been surpassing it by 25% in poverty.

Meaning that it is not a lack of work ethic that is keeping *costeños* in Guerrero down but structural racism. Guerrero is one of the states with the highest percentage of Afro-Mexicans living in it. It is not unreasonable to consider that they receive fewer social services because Mexico's Black population does not fit into *mestizo* normativity.

And if I may add a personal note, it is ultimately, in my opinion, these lack of opportunities that push young *costeños* into illicit activity. In my interviews with respondents, one respondent, whose name or location I will not share to respect his privacy, shared with me that he started trafficking drugs for a local gang to be able to pay his college tuition. He told me that it is just not possible to pay to go to a trade school and better oneself in life without working for them, the drug dealers, at some point. "To better yourself you need money, and if your parents and relatives can't help you, you turn to them to give you financial backing," he told me. So as much as I respect Baños Delgado as a writer and scholar, I do disagree that stagnation lingers in the "heart" and in the "black villages" of the Costa Chica. As a woman who comes from a *costeño* family and who has spent considerable time in the Costa Chica, I say with confidence that *costeños* are a hardworking people who are constantly looking to improve their situation even if that means having to leave the Costa Chica to do so.

One thing that this poem does particularly well, is emphasize that all Afro-*costeños* ought to be proud of being Black. Herein lies a critique against the lack of instruction when it comes to young men. There are so many poems and *versos* aimed at empowering little Afro-Mexican girls and teaching them to be proud of their dark skin. But men and boys are rarely ever instructed to love their skin. As Alán Pelaez Lopez notes, it was their mother—not other men—who encouraged them to love their skin, accent, and culture (29). By writing "Orgullo Negro," Baños Delgado is also signaling that men and boys must also learn to love their black skin for colorism to be challenged in the Costa Chica and in Mexico as a whole. When one thinks about it, the empowering verses that girls and women learn are taught to them because they will be attacked by other Black men. Baños Delgado is then nipping it in the bud and signaling that boys and men must also learn to love their skin and have pride—"Orgullo Negro"—in being Black.

The dire need for men and boys to also fight against colorism is evident as well in Vázquez Cisneros' Story. As she shared with me, Afro-Mexican women struggle against racism and sexism in Mexico.

Aleida Violeta Vázquez Cisneros' Story

In conversation, Afro-Mexican poet Aleida Violeta Vázquez Cisneros emphasized that Afro-Mexican writers, especially female writers, lack opportunities. Here again, social media proved to be a developing forum for information about these marginalized writers. I actually met Vázquez Cisneros through Facebook. She reached out to me after I promoted a conference on the African Diaspora in Mexico, where I would be a panelist, on my Facebook profile. Over time, we built a Facebook relationship, and I finally met her in person in April 2022 in Mexico City.

During a video chat interview through Facebook Messenger in March 2022, Vázquez Cisneros shared with me that women have historically been silenced and erased from the public sector in the Costa Chica and that she writes poetry and performs poetry so that she can regain her voice and free herself from the patriarchal margins:

> Pues que yo escribo desde ahí ya te decía y también quiero comentarte que hay. Yo creo que hay una parte o una necesidad muy grande. De escribir. Como mujeres. Para mí la poesía. No es un lujo para mí como se puede percibir el arte o la creación artística. Para mí la poesía es una necesidad. Porque es para mí terapia. Para mí es expresar. Es catártico, te lo juro. Es catártico escribir para mí. Pues bien, y creo que les pasa mucho a muchas mujeres negras o a muchas mujeres de la periferia. Creo que, porque el silenciamiento que ha habido histórico de nosotras hoy y representa un reto muy grande, como un obstáculo muy grande a romper. Y creo que también desde hoy estamos escribiendo, y no solo yo como poeta negra o poeta afromexicana. (Vásquez Cisneros)
>
> Well, I am writing from there, as I was telling you, and I also want to tell you that I think there is a part or a very big need to write as women. For me poetry is not a luxury, as art or artistic creation can be perceived. For me poetry is a necessity because it is for my therapy. For me it is to express. It is cathartic, I swear. It is cathartic to write for me. Well, and I think it happens a lot to many Black women or to many women from the periphery. I think because the historical silencing of us today represents a very big challenge, like an obstacle. A very big challenge, like a very big obstacle to break. And I think that we are also writing today, and not only me as a Black poet or Afro-Mexican poet.

In her opinion, writing is important for Afro-Mexican *costeña* women in particular because they have been a historically silenced minority-within-minority group. Vázquez Cisneros' journey into poetry is reminiscent of poets such as Audre Lorde and Gloria Anzaldúa who have also commented on poetry's therapeutic relief. It is by writing about taboo subjects, such as Gloria Anzaldúa does in her essay "La Prieta" (1981) and Audre Lorde does in "The Master's Tools" (1984), that what is often called etiquette and politeness become exposed as tools of silence that revolve around protecting abusive power structures. In "La Prieta" Anzaldúa confronts sexism, homophobia, and colorism in her family and in her own words feels "terrified" because she has to "call us [Mexican Americans] on a lot of shit like our own racism, our fear of women and sexuality" ("La Prieta" 347). In essence, Anzaldúa feels like she is betraying her people because she has to confront and call out the racism, homophobia, and sexism that she has experienced not only in her own family but also in the larger Mexican American community. In a similar vein, Lorde calls out white feminists, who are also supposed to be on her side. She calls out the willful ignorance of white feminists in her work by asserting that the "women of today are still being called upon to stretch across the gap of male ignorance and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old primarily tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns. Now we hear that it is the task of women of Color to educate white women" (108). Through this essay, Lorde points out the web of oppression that women of color are subject to. Women of color must not only fight against sexism but also racism from white women. Through her work, Vásquez Cisneros is pointing out the transnational nature of these issues. As an Afro-Mexican woman living in a coastal community, she is dealing with colorism, racism, and homophobia. And like her radical predecessors, she is turning to poetry to air out these concerns. As can be seen in the genre of the *corrido* and calypso, through popular art forms

those at the margins create proxy systems of justice where they can air their grievances and, in time, change society through language.

In our interview, Vázquez Cisneros shared that Afro-Mexican men may have a hard time breaking into the publishing industry due to the resounding idea of *mestizo* Mexico, but Afro-Mexican women are dealt a double blow. The first strike is that they are Afro-Mexican *women* in a patriarchal country, and two, they are women in the Costa Chica, which is itself sexist, patriarchal, and hypermasculine.

The patriarchal understanding of gender norms that is present in the Costa Chica has been documented and captured perfectly in Angustia Torres Díaz's and Israel Reyes Larrea's compilation *Alma Cimarrona* (1999), which I discussed in chapter two. Under the section "Ofensivos," Torres and Larrea document how gender norms in the Costa Chica revolve around the patriarchal male. The image of a Costa Chica hypermasculine epicenter, as one Costa Chica verse suggests, is of course only possible if men are not allowed to be openly homosexual or queer and if women do not overshadow men:

Soy de puro costa chica	I am from the heart of the Costa Chica
donde reinan los quereres,	where love reigns supreme,
donde los hombres	where men
¡ son hombres!	are men!
y las mujeres, ¡mujeres!	And women are women!
Donde no nacen maricas	Where no queers are born
y los que nacen ¡se mueren!	and those who are born, die!

As I have noted above, the Costa Chica constitutes one of the poorest regions in Mexico. Through *versos* men prove their bravado and their masculinity. In this sense, manhood is a performance, but like all illusions—gender too is an illusion here—those who do not fit the gender norms in the Costa Chica are violently erased so that the illusion can be maintained. As Kimberlé Crenshaw notes, all marginalized people do not experience marginalization the same way. Addressing and remedying one aspect such as colorism or racism doesn't immediately uplift those who face oppression from multiple directions:

> Discrimination, like traffic through an intersection, may flow in one direction, and it may flow in another. If an accident happens in an intersection, it can be caused by cars traveling from any number of directions and, sometimes, from all of them. Similarly, if a Black woman is harmed because she is in the intersection, her injury could result from sex discrimination or race discrimination. (149)

Although Crenshaw was advocating for Black women's rights in the United States at the time she published her article, it is also pertinent to studies in the Costa Chica. Afro-Mexicans are marginalized because they are Black in a *mestizo* normative country, but they also experience layers of discrimination based on their identities.

Like Silva Sandoval and Baños Delgado, Vásquez Cisneros has taken the social media route and reaches out to artists, organizations, and academics to promote her poetry. In an interview titled "Aleida Violeta, Afro-descendant poet" with *Lingüinotas*—a YouTube channel based out of Oaxaca, Mexico—she shared that one of the reasons she decided to become a writer was to make space for Afro-Mexican women and for Afro-Mexicans in Mexico and abroad. Her poems center around Mexico's *negritud*. Vázquez Cisneros' use of the word *negritud* evokes memories of Negritude writers of the 1930s, who confronted racism and the ongoing effects of

French post colonialism in their native lands. In a similar fashion to the negritude writers, Vásquez Cisneros is rejecting post-colonial teachings in Mexico that often do not include or mention the presence of Afro-Mexicans. As Vásquez Cisneros notes, everything she learned about being Afro-Mexican came to her from outside the traditional education system. Her education came chiefly from her maternal side and from the Black women in her family who played with rhymes and greeted one another with poetry.

After hearing Vázquez Cisneros' short 15-minute interview, I could not help but be reminded of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's TED Talk "The Danger of a Single Story" (2009). In her TED Talk Adichie pointed out that the person who gets to tell the story is in control, for "how [stories] are told, who tells them, when they're told, [and] how many stories are told" determine how we will see others (9:25). In a similar vein, Vázquez argues for *costeños* to have the right to tell their own stories and especially contends that women should be given the space to express themselves. In the interview, Vázquez notes that it is the lack of *costeño* stories that ultimately leads to *costeños*' alienation. In this statement, there is also a revelation. Afro-Mexicans did not have to be exterminated en masse to disappear from Mexico; they simply had to be written out. Their stories stopped being told. In other words, an absence of Black literature, music, history, and figures translated into an absence of Blacks in Mexico as well.

After our in-person interview in Mexico City, Vázquez Cisneros graciously shared her unpublished poetry collection with me and gave me permission to use it for my dissertation. After reading her collection several times and listening to her conduct interviews elsewhere, it is evident that the idea of a single *mestizo* story—*mestizo* normativity—continues to dominate Mexican thought. Her poem "Que me falta color" (That I Lack Color), exemplifies how Afro-Mexicans are *still* denied their Black identity. In her poem, Vázquez Cisneros, who also serves as

the speaker of the poem, illustrates how her identity is withheld from her by complete strangers who often know nothing about Mexico's African history. Through this poem she expands the single story of *mestizo* Mexico:

Me han dicho que no soy negra	I've been told that I'm not Black
Que pa' eso me falta color	That for that I lack color
Como si mi sangre fuera	As if my blood were
Cualquier cosa sin valor	Anything without value
Naci en Cuajinicuilapa	I was born in Cuajinicuilapa
Pueblo costeño del sur	A coastal town in the south
De Guerrero, tierra amada	Of Guerrero, beloved land
Donde abunda negritud	Where Blackness abounds
Orgullosa estoy, por tanto	Proud I am, therefore
De mi alma cimarrona,	Of my maroon soul,
Del espíritu que porto	Of the spirit that I carry
Y que nunca me abandona	And that never abandons me
¿Y tú, me dices que no?	And you tell me no?
¿Qué he de ser como el carbón?	That I should be like coal?
¿Para que tu voz apruebe	So that your voice approves
Todo esto que yo soy?	All this that I am?
¡Pue no! ¡no me da la gana!	Well, no! I don't feel like it!
¡Que me apruebe tu palabra!	To let your word, approve of me?!
Lo que he guardado en mi alma	What I have kept in my soul
Supera cualquier patraña	Surpasses any humbug

Negrura llevo en la sangre	Blackness is in my blood
Y es de África que llegó	And it's from Africa that it came
Negra es mi abuela y mi madre	Black is my grandmother and my mother
¡negra sigo siendo yo!	Black I am!

In this poem Vásquez notes the privilege and authority that non-Black people often have—or rather take up—in Black spaces. The tension in the poem is that Vásquez is not allowed to call herself Black or identify as an Afro-Mexican woman because supposedly she is not Black enough. Her poem is reminiscent of conversations in the LGBTQ+ community.

As a teaching assistant for a LGBT course at the University of Maryland at College Park, I have had the honor to sit in on such conversations. Students in the course have detailed how they have been told by their heterosexual peers that they do not *look* gay or that they cannot call themselves homosexuals, lesbians, or bisexuals until they have had sex with someone of the same sex. Are heterosexuals ever told that they cannot call themselves heterosexuals until they have had sex with someone of the opposite sex? No. In essence, the frustration that the students noted is that some heterosexuals want to define them and tell them how they ought to be gay and question their identity.

In a similar fashion, Vásquez Cisneros notes that non-Afro-Mexican people often have parameters for assessing Blackness that have nothing to do with how Afro-Mexicans recognize themselves. Afro-Mexicans recognize that a variety of skin colors and hair patterns exist within the Afro-Mexican community. There are Afro-Mexicans who are very fair skinned and there are Afro-Mexicans who are very dark skinned. And there are those who fall everywhere in between. There is no right way to be an Afro-Mexican. But, in the Mexican context, outsiders often claim that only those who have dark skin and curly hair can claim to be *true* Afro-Mexicans.

When one examines the tone of the poem, one notes the exhaustion that comes with being an Afro-Mexican woman who is supposedly not dark enough to call herself Black. Throughout the poem, Vásquez panders to the critics. She states that she was born in Cuajinicuilapa, Guerrero, which is known as the Mexican town with the highest number of Afro-Mexicans. Moreover, she details the history of marronage that her community comes from, and lastly, she notes that her mother and grandmother are Black. It is almost as if she is trying to prove her Blackness and prove that she is Black enough. These are things that she does not need to prove nor explain.

Her poem reveals the privilege that comes with being non-Black and the excessive explaining that those who claim Blackness often have to do. As Audre Lorde so famously stated, and it bears repeating, "an old and primary tool of all oppressors [is] to keep the oppressed occupied with the master's concerns." In this case, the master's concerns are the Mexican sub-oppressors' concerns. Throughout the poem, readers can sense Vásquez Cisneros' exhaustion with detailing where she comes from and who her mother and grandmother are so that she can finally be allowed to call herself Black. Like the negritude writers of the 1930s, Vásquez Cisneros and many other Afro-Mexican writers are demanding the right to identify themselves and not be identified.

In Summary

In this chapter I have noted how Afro-Mexican writers Filemón Silva Sandoval, Abel Emigdio Baños Delgado, and Aleida Violeta Vázquez Cisneros use social media to distribute their written works and make connections with scholars outside of Mexico. It is through social media that these writers are able to recreate Mexico and create a Mexico that includes the voices of Afro-Mexicans.

Conclusion: There Can Be No Balance of Stories Without Balance of Power

> So, what if before my Mexican trip, I had followed the immigration debate from both sides, the U.S. and the Mexican? What if my mother had told us that Fide's family was poor and hardworking? What if we had an African television network that broadcast diverse African stories all over the world? What the Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe calls "a balance of stories."
>
> —Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie from "The Danger of a Single Story"

I opened up the dissertation with an excerpt from Adichie's now famous TED Talk "The Danger of a Single Story." In her TED Talk, she argued that the stereotypes, beliefs, and attitudes we hold about others are largely shaped by what stories we hear. As an example, she used the immigration debate in the United States to illustrate how Mexicans are often depicted as undocumented immigrants "fleecing the healthcare system, sneaking across the border, [and] being arrested at the border." The story of undocumented Mexican immigrants became so routine that Adichie herself admits to viewing Mexicans as one thing: "the abject immigrant" (08:42). As Adichie notes, stories have the power to create stereotypes and scripts for people we have never met.

Moreover, Adichie's story speaks to class and nation. Note how Adichie had a vast amount of access to stories about Mexicans in the United States, but the opposite was not true. In the United States, supposedly a haven for free speech, Mexicans rarely have the chance to sit up

on a stage and tell their stories through their own perspective. Adiche's TED Talk shows how stories move from the top down. From the mouths of the colonizers to the thoughts of the colonized.

As Adichie notes, it is only by having more stories that the danger of a single story can be dispelled. Chinua Achebe, one of the most influential writers of Nigeria and the Nigerian diaspora, noted that decolonization could only occur if people were able to tell their own stories and be masters of their own narratives:

> There's a reaction to a reaction, and there will be a further reaction to that. And I think that's the way it will go, until what I call a balance of stories is secured. And this is really what I personally wish this century to see—a balance of stories where every people will be able to contribute to a definition of themselves, where we are not victims of other people's accounts. This is not to say that nobody should write about anybody else—I think they should, but those that have been written about should also participate in the making of these stories. (Achebe "An African Voice")

As Achebe noted towards the end of his life, he wanted those being written about to have the opportunity to write back, to talk back, and have a hand in defining their own identities and creating their own stories. Those being written about should have the opportunity to define themselves.

Maybe if Fide had a chance to tell his story, Adichie would have seen him and his family as something more than poor. And maybe if Adichie had traveled to Mexico and actually met and talked with Mexicans, she would have seen that not all Mexicans have the desire to migrate to the United States. The possibility for these stories to occur also requires not only a balance of stories but a balance of power. As has been seen throughout this dissertation, those who have

power, and often especially state power, get to write not only about themselves but tell stories about everyone else.

Academia and imperialism have historically walked hand in hand. As this dissertation has shown, intellectuals, often connected with the state, set the rules and these rules, which are divorced from marginalized communities, are used to analyze cultural productions from marginalized groups. As Dalton notes, intellectuals in Mexico have often reproduced and reinforced the state's agenda through academic scholarship:

> A form of circular logic began to emerge where the state coded hybridized bodies as mestizo, and a mestizo body was by definition hybrid—technologically, racially, culturally, or some combination thereof. Differing forms of hybridity soon became conflated. As Amerindian peoples and bodies underwent technological hybridity, they became marked with modernity and thus racially and culturally hybrid. As such, official discourses held that these people now belonged to the mestizo "majority." In many cases, authors and cultural producers used technologically hybrid subjects to construct, amplify, and impose preferred racial and gender identities from the center to the periphery. Post-revolutionary representations of the racially, technologically, and culturally hybrid body almost always appeared as future-oriented ideals toward which the nation should aspire. Corporeal hybridity and modernity became the founding elements of a distinctly Mexican society that was technologically advanced, racially and culturally mixed, and clearly gendered. Mestizaje thus represented the discursive tool that could overcome perceived indigenous shortcomings and initiate Mexico into the modern world. (7)

As Dalton notes, in the state's race to modernity, Mexico's Amerindian peoples have been rhetorically subjected to all kinds of definitions such as *mestizaje* and hybridity. These are

academic theories that move from the top down. The points of these definitions, *mestizo* and hybrid, has been to remove the indigenous subject away from their traditional ways of knowledge and to bring them into the fold of capitalism. Modernity is necessary not so much to better the lives of indigenous peoples but to provide more exploitable bodies for the capitalist Mexican state.

Although Dalton's work deals primarily with modernity and Mexico's indigenous peoples, Dalton's critiques against José Vasconcelos' work on *mestizaje* and Néstor García Canclini's work on hybridity have proved to be useful for this dissertation. In chapter one, I noted that Afro-Mexican literature has always been present in Mexico. Folktales in Mexico tie *costeños* to West and Central African storytelling practices. Once again here, scholars can begin to see how printed works are valued over oral productions. In order for *costeños* folktales to be taken seriously they needed to be written down first. In my travels to the Costa Chica, many storytellers lamented the fact that their stories are increasingly being written down. I must admit that I did not understand this lamentation at first. Why wouldn't someone want their stories to be written down and shared with the world? The thing is that when these stories are written down, they also become divorced from their sites and people of origin. When *costeños* tell their own stories, people are forced to travel to the Costa Chica and listen to them and see how they live. When these stories are written down and leave the Costa Chica, storytellers lose a modicum of power over their stories and their own lives. As Valencia Valencia and Meza Herrera notes, Afro-Mexican folklore would soon "disappear" with the introduction of technology into Afro-Mexicans homes. Here too readers can note how academics, whether they intended to or not, walked hand in hand with state sanctioned narratives of *mestizo* Mexico.

In my second chapter, I noted that this stripping of Afro-Mexicans' African heritage does not just stop at folklore but also any other cultural products Afro-Mexicans may produce such as ballads, *versos*, and poetry. I have argued that by suspending the dominant view of *mestizo* Mexico, these cultural practices would yield richer results. These richer results include comparative readings with West African storytelling traditions as well as Afrodiasporic stories in the American and Caribbean diaspora.

In my third chapter, I noted how the term Afro-Mexican acquires different, more varied meanings in the diaspora, where there is a multiplicity of experiences and interpretations of categories such as race, culture, and nation. Additionally, I noted how Afro-Mexican writers in the diaspora use their own unique backgrounds as Afro-Mexicans to challenge *mestizo* normativity. Afro-Mexicans' experiences in the United States also, undoubtedly, expand the definitions of Afro *mexicanidad*. Given the vast array of Afro-Mexicans, it would make more sense to read Afro-Mexican works as works coming from an Afro diasporic people in the Americas. My dissertation was of course limited to Afro-Mexicans in the Costa Chica and the United States, but there are Afro-Mexicans who have moved to Europe or other parts of the world and negotiate their Black and Mexican identity in different ways.

In the fourth and final chapter, I share my interview recordings of my talks with poets and storytellers Filemón Silva Sandoval, Abel Emigdio Baños Delgado, and Aleida Violeta Vázquez Cisneros. Although all three are Afro-Mexican writers, they approach Afro Mexico in vastly different ways. Silva Sandoval's work continuously critiques the modern Mexican state. In my own talks with Silva Sandoval, he has criticized modernity precisely because it has commercialized so much of the Costa Chica such as Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca and Acapulco, Guerrero and made the most beautiful parts of the Costa Chica open to foreigners and hostile to

locals. Baños Delgado, who also pushes for Afro-Mexico, looks inward and argues that no progress can come to the Costa Chica unless people feel deserving of it. As he notes, throughout his works, there needs to be more Black pride in the Costa Chica. Vázquez Cisneros, who is the only female *costeña* poet I have included in my dissertation, has a much more nuanced approach to liberation for Afro-Mexicans. As her own poetry notes, it is not enough for *costeños* to have Black pride. There must also be more spaces for women to tell their stories. Vázquez Cisneros' poetry notes that race and colonialism cannot be disentangled from gender. The writers interviewed in the last chapter show that Afro-Mexicans may share the same identity but have vastly different goals for the community, and this difference is reflected in their works.

Towards the end of writing this dissertation, I have noted that many Afro-Mexican writers are moving towards digital spaces to publish their works and are working with filmmakers to tell their stories. By turning to digital platforms, I can see poets and writers trying to recreate their own communal storytelling style with the world.

While I was in Huatulco, Oaxaca attending the *I Foro de Jovenes Afro-Mexicanos: Historia, identidad, pertenencia y orgullo afromexicano*, I noted that many Afro-Mexican artists are increasingly turning towards digital platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube to tell their stories. At the conference, I met the creators of *Afrochingonas*, a podcast channel dedicated to telling the stories of Afro-Mexicans all over Mexico. And Manuel Robles, a PhD Candidate in History at the University of Pittsburgh, is doing amazing work with AMCO. There is also André Lo Sánchez, an Afro-Mexican filmmaker, who founded Cardumenlab, a filmmaking collective dedicated to telling the stories of Afro-Mexicans through digital spaces.

Below, I attach a group photo taken on April 15, 2022, by Lo Sánchez. I attach this photo to show the increasing number of youth who are challenging *mestizo* normativity and taking back

their stories. Future scholarship will look into how Afro-Mexicans are challenging the idea of the *mestizo* Mexico through digital activism:

Figure 7: From left to right: Brisa Valdez Prudente, wearing a pink jumper, Candelaria Donají Méndez Tello, wearing a green shirt, me, wearing a spotted blue and white shirt, Méndez Tello's daughter, throwing up a peace sign and wearing white shorts, and André Lo Sánchez, wearing a pink T-shirt and reading glasses.

The aim of my dissertation has not only been to review the history of Afro-Mexican literature but also to show the connections that Afro-Mexican folklore has to West and Central African storytelling traditions and the connections that contemporary works have to other Afro diasporic cultural productions. In creating these comparative analyses, I hope to have shown the beauty of heterogeneity and the monotony of homogeneity. I wish for a future of scholarship that reads from the bottom up and not the top down.

Bibliography

Achebe, Chinua. “An African Voice.” *The Atlantic*, 2 Aug. 2000, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2000/08/an-african-voice/306020/.

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. *The Danger of a Single Story*. 2009, https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story/transcript?language=en.

Aguirre Beltrán, Gonzalo. *Cuijla, Esbozo Etnográfico de Un Pueblo Negro*. Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1958.

Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books, 1999.

---. “La Prieta.” *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, edited by Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, 4th ed., State University of New York Press, 2015.

Apocada Valdez, Manuel. “Coplas y Fandangos de La Costa Chica de México.” *Revista de Literaturas Populares*, vol. XVI–1, no. Y2, 2016, pp. 218–242.

Banks, Taunya. “Mestizaje and the Mexican Mestizo Self: No Hay Sangre Negra, So There Is No Blackness.” *Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal*, vol. 15, no. 199, 2006, pp. 199–233.

Bennett, Herman Lee. *Africans in Colonial Mexico : Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570-1640*. Indiana University Press, 2003.

Berlant, Laurent, and Michael Warner. “Sex in Public.” *The University of Chicago Press*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1998, pp. 547–566.

Bonfil Batalla, Guillermo. *México Profundo : Reclaiming a Civilization*. Translated by Philip Adams Dennis, University of Texas Press, 1996.

Brown, Ariana. *Sana Sana*. Game Over Books, 2020.

---. *We Are Owed*. Grieveland, 2021.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble*. Routledge, 1999.

Caruth, Cathy. "Psychoanalysis in the Ashes of History." *Trauma in Contemporary Literature: Narrative and Representation*, edited by Marita Nadal and Mónica Calvo, 1st ed., Routledge, 2014.

Christen, Kimberly A. *Clowns & Tricksters : An Encyclopedia of Tradition and Culture*. ABC-CLIO, 1998.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Form*, vol. 1989, no. 1, University of Chicago Legal Form, 1989, pp. 139–167.

Cristina Díaz Pérez, María, et al., editors. *Jamás Fandango al Cielo: Narrative Afromestiza*. Dirección General de Culturas Populares, 1991.

Dalton, David. *Mestizo Modernity: Race, Technology, and the Body in Post-Revolutionary Mexico*. University of Florida Press, 2018.

Díaz Pérez, María Cristina. "Introducción." *Jamás Fandango al Cielo Narrativa Afromestiza*, edited by María Cristina Díaz Pérez et al., Dirección General de Culturas Populares, 1993, pp. 19–26.

Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. Routledge, 1992.

García Canclini, Néstor. *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. Translated by Christopher L. Chiappari and Silvia L. López, University of Minnesota

Press, 1995. Kindle.

Gates, Henry Louis. *Black in Latin America*. New York University Press, 2011.

Glissant, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. University of Michigan Press, 1997.

Goodwin, Robert. *Crossing the Continent, 1527–1540: The Story of the First African in American History*. HarperCollins e-books, 2008. Kindle.

Green, Debra. "African Mexicans in Spanish Slave Societies in America: A Critical Location of Sources." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 40, no. 4, 2010, pp. 683–699.

Guadalupe Olivia Ortega Ramírez, Naú Silverio Niño Gutiérrez, and Miguel Ángel Cruz Vicente. *Marginación En El Estado de Guerrero, Daños Colaterales de La Pandemia Covid 19*. Universidad Autónoma de Guerrero, 2022, pp. 185–190, https://ru.iiec.unam.mx/5968/1/1.%20032-Ortega-Ni%C3%B1o-Cruz.pdf.

Hale, Thomas A. *Griots and Griottes : Masters of Words and Music*. Indiana University Press, 2007.

"Hausa." *Joshua Project*, https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/12070. Accessed 22 Feb. 2023.

Hickman, Christine B. "The Devil and the One Drop Rule: Racial Categories, African Americans, and the U.S. Census." *Michigan Law Review*, vol. 95, no. 5, 1997, pp. 1161–1265.

Jiménez Román, Mirian, and Juan Flores, editors. *The Afro-Latin@ Reader : History and Culture in the United States*. Duke University Press, 2010.

Keegan, Nathan. "Call-and-Response: An Ancient Linguistic Device Surfaces in Usher's 'Love in This Club.'" *Elements*, 2009, pp. 9–20.

Kerényi, Karl. *The Trickster: A Study in American Indian Mythology*. Edited by Paul Radin,

Translated by Richard Francis Carrington, Normanby Press, 2015.

"La Danza de Los Diablos." *Gobierno de México*, 5 June 2019, https://www.gob.mx/cultura/articulos/la-danza-de-los-diablos-patrimonio-afromexicano-en-la-costa-chica-de-guerrero?idiom=es.

La danza de los Diablos Negros. Alborada Tixtla, 2022, https://fb.watch/nCz0VdPibY/.

Lewis, Laura A. "Of Ships and Saints: History, Memory, and Place in the Making of Moreno Mexican Identity." *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 16, no. 1, American Anthropological Society, 2001, pp. 62–82, https://doi.org10.1525/can.2001.16.1.62.

Lomnitz, Claudio. *Deep Mexico, Silent Mexico: An Anthropology of Nationalism*. University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

López, Rick A. *Crafting Mexico: Intellectuals, Artisans, and the State after the Revolution*. Duke University Press Books, 2010.

Lorde, Audre. "'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House.'" *Sister Outsider : Essays and Speeches*, The Crossing Press, 1984, pp. 106–109.

Lund, Joshua. *The Mestizo State: Reading Race in Modern Mexico*. University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

Marshall, Emily Zobel. *American Trickster : Trauma, Tradition and Brer Rabbit*. Rowman & Littlefield International, 2019, p. 167. Kindle.

Masferrer León, Cristina. "'I'm Not Sitting Next To You': Education and Racism in Afro-Mexican Communities." *Diálogos Sobre Educación. Temas Actuales En Investigación Educativa*, vol. 7, no. 13, 2016, pp. 1–16.

McDowell, John. *¡Corrido!: The Living Ballad of Mexico's Western Coast*. Bilingual Edition, University of New Mexico Press, 2015.

---. *Poetry and Violence: The Ballad Tradition of Mexico's Costa Chica*. University of Illinois Press, 2000.

Meza Herrera, Malinali. "Presentación." *Jamás Fandango al Cielo: Narrativa Afromestiza*, 1st ed., Dirección General de Culturas Populares, 1993, pp. 9–11.

Moore, Zena. "Post-Colonial Influences in Spanish Diaspora: Christian Doctrine and the Depiction of Women in Tejano Border Songs and Calypso." *Counterpoints* , vol. 96, Peter Lang AG, 1999, pp. 215–233.

Moreiras, Alberto. *The Exhaustion of Difference: The Politics of Latin American Cultural Studies*. Duke University Press, 2001.

Moreno, Hector. *Untitled*. 4 Mar. 2023, https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10160533388044568&set=a.1015285270443956 8.

Ortiz, Fernando. *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*. Translated by Harriet de Onís, Duke University Press, 1995.

Paetzold, Christopher. "SINGING BENEATH THE ALHAMBRA: THE NORTH AFRICAN AND ARABIC PAST AND PRESENT IN CONTEMPORARY ANDALUSIAN MUSIC." *Journal of Spanish Cultural Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, Routledge, June 2009, pp. 207–223.

Palmer, Colin A. *Slaves of the White God: Blacks in Mexico, 1570-1650*. Harvard University Press, 1976.

Palou, Pedro Angel. *El Fracaso Del Mestizo*. Ariel, 2014.

Patel, Ian. "THE ROLE OF TESTIMONY AND TESTIMONIAL ANALYSIS IN HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCACY AND RESEARCH." *State Crime Journal*, vol. 1, no. 2, Pluto

Journals, 2012, pp. 235–265.

Pelaez Lopez, Alán. *Intergalactic Travels : Poems from a Fugitive Alien*. The Operating System, 2020, p. 114.

Polar, Antonio Cornejo. "Mestizaje and Hybridity: The Risks of Metaphor--Notes." *The Latin American Cultural Studies Reader*, edited by Ana Del Sarto et al., Duke University Press Books, 2004, pp. 760–764.

Ramsay, Paulette. *Afro-Mexican Constructions of Diaspora, Gender, Identity and Nation*. University of the West Indies Press, 2016. Kindle.

---. "Establishing an Independent Identity: Afro-Mexican Oral Narratives from 'Jamás Fandango al Cielo' in the Context of Post-Colonial Criticism." *The Langston Hughes Review*, vol. 16, no. 1/2, The Langston Hughes Review, 1999, pp. 8–17.

Riggs, Marlon. *Tongues Untied*. Alexander Street, 1989, https://fod.infobase.com/p_ViewVideo.aspx?xtid=57872.

Rodríguez, Ileana. "Postmodern Theory and Cultural Criticism in Spanish America and Brazil." *A Companion to Latin American Literature and Culture*, edited by Sara Castro-Klaren, 1st ed., Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, pp. 602–619.

Rosario Jackson, María. "Profile of an Afro-Latina: Black, Mexican, Both." *The Afro-Latin@ Reader : History and Culture in the United States*, edited by Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores, Duke University Press, 2010, pp. 438–442.

Rosas Mayén, Norma. *Afro-Hispanic Linguistic Remnants in Mexico: The Case of the Costa Chica Region*. Iberoamericana Editorial Vervuert, 2021. Kindle.

Sankofa - Black Cultural Festival. https://www.blackculturalfestival.com/sankofa/.

Seed, Patricia. "Social Dimensions of Race : Mexico City , 1753." *The Hispanic American*

Historical , vol. 62, no. 4, 1982, pp. 569–606.

Sidikou, Aissata G., and Thomas A. Hale, editors. *Women's Songs From West Africa*. Indiana University, 2014.

Silva Sandoval, Filemón. *Lej Voy a Cantá Un Corrido Costa Chica: Cuentos de La Negrada La Raíz Olvidada*. Grupo Editorial FSP de C.V., 2015.

Somerville, Siobhan. "Queer." *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, edited by Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler, NYU Press, 2007, pp. 203–207.

Stross, Brian. "The Hybrid Metaphor: From Biology to Culture." *The Journal of American Folklore*, vol. 112, no. 445, University of Illinois Press, 1999, pp. 254–267.

Sue, Christina A. *Land of the Cosmic Race: Race Mixture, Racism, and Blackness in Mexico*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

Temple, Christel N. "The Emergence of Sankofa Practice in the United States: A Modern History." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2010, pp. 127–150.

Torres Díaz, Angustia, and Israel Reyes Larrea, editors. *Alma Cimarrona: Versos Costeños y Poesía Regional*. 1st ed., Programa de Apoyo a las Culturas Municipales y Comunitarias, 1999.

Travis, Ryan Hope. "Gaspar Yanga's Maroon Society, Veracruz, Mexico." *The SAGE Encyclopedia of African Cultural Heritage in North America*, edited by Mwalimu J. Shujaa & Kenya J. Shujaa, SAGE Publications Incorporated, 2015, pp. 419–420.

Vajić Assist, Nataša. "The Trickster's Transformation from Africa to America." *European Journal of Social Sciences Education*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2017, pp. 133–137.

Valencia Valencia, Enrique. "Prologo." *Jamás Fandango al Cielo Narrativa Afromestiza*, edited by María Cristina Díaz Pérez et al., Dirección General de Culturas Populares, 1993, pp.

13–17.

Vasconcelos, José. *The Cosmic Race / La Raza Cósmica*. Translated by Didier T. Jaén, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

Vásquez Cisneros, Aleida Violeta. 2 Mar. 2022.

Vaughn, Bobby. "Afro-Mexico: Blacks, Indigenas, Politics, and the Greater Diaspora." *Neither Enemies nor Friends: Latinos, Blacks, Afro-Latinos*, edited by Anani Dzidzienyo and Suzanne Oboler, Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, pp. 117–136.

---. "Mexico Negro: From the Shadows of Nationalist Mestizaje to New Possibilities in Afro-Mexican Identity." *Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol. 6, 2013, p. 227.

Vinson, Ben. "The Racial Profile of a Rural Mexican Province in the 'Costa Chica': Igualapa in 1791." *Americas*, vol. 57, no. 2, Cambridge University Press (CUP), Oct. 2000, pp. 269–282.

von Germeten, Nicole. "Juan Roque's Donation of a House to the Zape Cofraternity, Mexico City, 1623." *Afro-Latino Voices: Narratives from the Early Modern Ibero-Atlantic World, 1550-1812*, edited by Kathryn Joy McKnight and Leo J. Garofalo, Hackett Publishing Co., 2009, pp. 83–103.

Wa Thiong', Ngũgĩ. "Notes towards a Performance Theory of Orature." *A Journal of the Performing Arts*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2007, pp. 4–7.

Weltman-Cisneros, Talia, and Candelaria Donají Méndez Tello. "Negros-Afromexicanos: Recognition and the Politics of Identity in Contemporary Mexico." *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 2013, pp. 140–156.

Werner, Alice. *Myths and Legends of the Bantu A Treasury of Incredible Tales from South Africa*. Delhi Open Books, 2021. Kindle.

Whitney, Robert. “Nation, State, and the Making of Cuban Working Class, 1920-1940.” *State of Ambiguity: Civic Life and Culture in Cuba’s First Republic*, edited by Steven Palmer et al., Duke University Press, 2014, pp. 292–317.

Zimmerman, Edith. *13 Reasons We Type in Lowercase*. 14 Feb. 2019.