Special Symposium

THE AFRICAN DIASPORA THROUGH OJOS MEXICANOS\(^1\): BLACKNESS AND MEXICANIDAD IN SOUTHERN MEXICO

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Blackness and Mexican-ness exist in an uneasy tension in Mexico and this tension is apparent to blacks and non-blacks alike. The tension manifests itself both in the Afro-Mexican communities of the rural Costa Chica region as in non-black urban central Mexico where I have also lived and studied for a number of years. This tension owes in large part to Mexico’s nationalist preoccupation with race mixture, or mestizaje, which is understood by both blacks and non-blacks to be part and parcel of mexicanidad (Mexican-ness). While mestizaje has silenced blackness on a national scale, Afro-Mexicans in the Costa Chica live a black identity that is affected by, but not erased by such a national project.

BLACKNESS THROUGH OJOS MEXICANOS

What does blackness mean in Mexico? And, is there anything particularly Mexican about it? One of the interesting things about studying blackness in Mexico is the fact that since Afro-Mexicans have lived in a relatively isolated rural part of Mexico and have made little impact on the national consciousness, at least two separate discourses of blackness arise. One discourse exists in the Costa Chica, where blackness is ubiquitous, taken for granted, and permeates people’s daily lives. The other discourse is what I call a central Mexican discourse on blackness—a discourse I observe in Mexico City where blacks are almost never seen and where most people have no idea that there are blacks in Mexico at all. First, we’ll consider the Costa Chica discourse on blackness and how Afro-Mexicans themselves construct their own identity. The racial categories they use serve as a useful way to begin our examination.

I will begin the discussion of race in the Costa Chica by presenting two illustrative examples of how people use the words negro and moreno—two words that Afro-Mexicans frequently use to describe themselves. One afternoon,
while chatting with Estreberta, an Afro-Mexican woman in her forties, we were interrupted by a neighbor who stopped in for a visit. Estreberta invited the somewhat older woman, whom she respectfully addresses as Tía (auntie), to join us on the porch. They chatted about events in the neighborhood when the conversation shifted to an upcoming wedding. Tía was unaware of the wedding.

“Yeah,” explained Estreberta. “She’s going to get married with a negro from (the town of) Morelos.”

From the tone of her voice, Estreberta did not appear to be in insinuating anything particularly significant about the man’s color—just that he was a black man from Morelos. Tía did not see it that way and immediately responded with, “Oh, don’t say negro, Estreberta!”

Estreberta insisted, “But he is negro. Just as negro as me.”

Tía sighed in resignation, shook her head, and went on with the conversation.

In the Costa Chica, people of African descent variously use negro and moreno to describe themselves and to refer to one another. Both terms more or less denote the pigmentation of one’s skin: negro refers to the darkest skin and moreno refers to skin tones considered lighter. The use of the word negro is often—but not always—considered overly blunt and is avoided in polite conversation, no matter what the color of the person involved may be. Unlike in other Latin American countries including Brazil (see Hanchard (1994)) and Colombia (see Streicker (1995) and Wade (1993)), one’s being categorized as negro or moreno does not seem to have an overt class component in Mexico, where no salient mulatto category exists. This is true partly because most blacks in the Costa Chica self-describe as poor and there is no history of a class of well-to-do blacks, such that a differentiation might have become normalized in language. Blacks, relative to the dominant mestizos, have always been and continue to be poor.

Moreno is generally used in the Costa Chica to describe a person of African descent of a skin color lighter than a negro. It is also the preferred term in polite conversation, referring to a black person regardless of his or her color. Therefore, most people use the term moreno when speaking of themselves or of other black people. Both the denotative understanding of moreno (lighter skin) and the more euphemistic polite usage create a certain ambiguity and tension, as illustrated in the following exchange.

Over the course of an interview primarily centered on the history of town of Collantes, Doña Angustia, 65, almost always used the word negro to refer to the blacks in the region. For example, in making the point that Collantes has