Negra Hasta La Muerte
(Black Until the Death)

Ashley Ngozi Agbasoga

Black Mexican NGOs and collectives—such as México Negro A.C., AMCO A.C., Colectiva Ñaa Tunda A.C., La SEPIA, and others—have fought for municipal, state, and national recognition for an array of reasons—particularly for promised protections against discriminatory practices and the allocation of deeply needed material and structural resources in Black and Afrodescendant communities throughout the country. In 2015, México counted its Black, Black-Indigenous, and Afro-descendant population for the first time in its intercensal survey since the official institutional abolition of racial categories in 1821. Further, in April 2019, the Mexican Senate voted unanimously to recognize Afro-Mexicans in its constitution. The addition of Section C to Article 2 of the Mexican Constitution "recognizes people, Afro-Mexican towns, and communities as part of the *multicultural composition of the nation*."[1] Some have welcomed this official admission into the nation; others reluctantly so; organizations and community members expressed reservations about what recognition could truly bring to Black communities, often citing the failed infrastructure, investment, and anti-discrimination projects that the Mexican government have promised Indigenous communities since the 1990s.

During this same time period of this very recognition and institutionalization of blackness,[2] the Guardia Nacional (National Guard) was formed. Created as a coalition of officials from the Federal Police, Military Police, and Naval Police, the Guardia Nacional wielded unprecedented powers granted by the government under the guise of national security. The Guardia Nacional has already been cited for numerous brutalities particularly along México's southern border against Black/African and (non-black) Central American migrants.

With the dissemination of images, news reports, and stories from Black migrants, social media soon became ablaze with people expressing their shock and disbelief--often citing the seemingly contradictory nature of the moment**.** How could México extend rights to Black/Afrodescendant people, yet simultaneously oversee such horrors against Black migrants?

In this article, I examine the ways in which the term *Afro* is taken up by the Mexican state in the wake of recent recognition and institutionalization of blackness, arguing that the term serves as a necessary function in that institutionalization. This helps to maintain the state ideology of mestizaje, which requires the continued subjugation and eventual elimination of Black and Indigenous peoples.

It is important to discuss the United States' role in increased border policing and its legacy of training military, police, and death squads for right-wing Latin American governments, and this fact should not be eschewed in the discussion of the Guardia Nacional.[3] Alongside this point, I also urge for a closer examination of the colonial foundations that the Mexican state, as well as the project of modernity established in what is now known as the Americas, contribute to the ways in which Black and Indigenous peoples have continued to experience immense violence.[4] Upon a deeper look into México's past and present, the simultaneity of the State recognition and institutionalization of blackness and the horrific conditions that Black migrants are met with at the hands of Mexican authorities, is not a contradictory but, rather, co-constitutive.

Understanding the utilization of *Afro*[5] as it is deployed by the Mexican state—a term that many Black and Afro-descendant communities deem as a newer term and oftentimes reject—could help illuminate the linkages of the seeming contradiction above. In a moment in which blackness is recognized after hundreds of years of systematic erasure, yet actively monitored, policed, and cracked down upon, I ask: What are the terms and conditions under which blackness is recognized by the state? And what happens with the impossibility of meeting the state's rubrics on inclusion into the (mestizo) state**?** In this piece, I will give a brief history on blackness and mestizaje in what is now known as México, followed by a situating of the "multicultural" present. Following this, I will then use excerpts from my ethnographic work conducted from 2016-2020 to illustrate how Black and Black/Afro-Indigenous women contend with the shift in state recognition of blackness and indigeneity. I hope to contribute into a conversation concerning Black resistance and worldmaking that has been and is present in not only the territory widely known as Mexico, but also throughout the Americas/Abya Yala.

A Brief on Mestizaje and Blackness in México

Historian Herman Bennett notes that in 1640, New Spain "contained the second-largest population of enslaved Africans and the greatest number of free blacks in the Americas"[6] And, despite the much heavier attention given to Africans and their descendants situated in coastal areas, Mexico's Black and Afro-descendant population historically have lived in large numbers throughout the country—particularly in urban areas such as Mexico City which, at one time, had the largest concentration of Africans in the urban New World.[7]

The colonial Latin American racial classification system—*La Sistema de Castas* (The Caste System)—was a racial classification schema based on various degrees of mixing. The Casta system set and routinized "genealogical requirements" that "helped shape social practices, notions of self, and concepts of communal belonging."[8] These racial configurations often shifted across spatiotemporal contexts to reflect and represent different racial "mixtures"; however, what remained constant

was that Black and/or Indigenous people were always depicted at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

With the waves of independence movements throughout Latin America in the early 1800s also came an official abolishment of the Casta system that had been present in the region for more than 200 years. Mexico was no exception; under the brief administration of Vicente Guerrero, an Afro-Mexican himself, slavery was abolished in 1829 and racial classifications were abolished.

Of course, this did not mean that race disappeared. In fact, its extrajudicial nature expanded in a place where Mexican state officials, intellectuals, and mestizo society alike espoused that because the modern nation was "mixed," that there was no race—and therefore, there could be no racism. This framework became the foundation to which Mexico and many other Latin American nations constructed its emerging nation-states in the dawn of independence from Spain and Portugal.

During the post-revolutionary government of Álvaro Obregón, the Mexican government officially adopted mestizaje—characterized mainly as the "mixing" of European and Indigenous peoples[9]—and to a different degree, Black people. In his seminal text La Raza Cósmica, the Secretary of Public Education José Vasconcelos constructed a mestizo vision for Mexico's future, consisting of what he termed a Cosmic Race. The Cosmic Race, as Vasconcelos viewed it, consisted of "A mixture of races… [that] will lead to the creation of a type infinitely superior to all that have previously existed."[10]

Although engagements with Vasconcelos and his most notable text discuss his emphasis on European and Indian mixture to secure a more modern race, Vasconcelos did not ignore the vast Black population in Latin America:

> 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, by grafting onto the related race, would take the jump of millions of years… 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, for that reason, of perpetuation.[11]

This passage, as well as others throughout the text, demonstrate that mestizaje (and in this case, Vasconcelos' version) advocated for the direct, "voluntary" extinction of Black people in Mexico and Latin America; for Indigenous people, Vasconcelos used the language of assimilation—a supposed, more humane version in comparison to the United States and its extermination of Native Americans. Nonetheless, mestizaje, and by extension the modern Mexican citizen, is predicated upon the eventual extinction—through assimilation or other means—of Black and Indigenous people.

Vasconcelos and his version of mestizaje ideology wielded immense political, social, and economic influence, as the *mestizo* became the Mexican citizen and

continues to be central in Mexican education, construction of monuments representative of the state, and the arts. The only place for Indigenous and Black/Afrodescendants in mestizaje were thus placed in the past.

Mexico's Multicultural Present

The 1980s through the first decade of the 21st century saw a sweep in institutional recognition of Black and Indigenous populations throughout Latin America.[12] In México's case, 1992 marked the year in which the national senate amended Mexico's constitution to not only state Indigenous rights; it also declared itself a pluricultural nation.[13] Twenty-seven years later, in April of 2019, the Mexican National Senate voted unanimously to recognize Afro-Mexicans in its constitution under Article 2, Section C.

This move was greatly celebrated by groups that had advocated for national recognition. *La Comisión de Derechos Humanos de la Ciudad de México* (The Mexico City Human Rights Commission) released a press statement on the constitutional recognition soon after:

> *Esta Defensoría considera que era imprescindible la Declaratoria del Congreso de la Unión de la Reforma Constitucional en materia de reconocimiento a las personas afrodescendientes para subsanar la deuda de invisibilidad y exclusión que han enfrentado por más 400 años. La adición del Apartado C, al Artículo 2 de la Constitución Política de los Estados Unidos Mexicanos reconoce a las personas, pueblos y comunidades afromexicanas como parte de la composición pluricultural de la nación… Para esta Comisión de Derechos Humanos, la adición constitucional significa un momento histórico para México, pues desde su llegada a este territorio, la población afrodescendiente ha padecido discriminación estructural, a través de un desigual ejercicio de sus derechos humanos, tanto a nivel individual como colectivo.*
>
> [This [human rights commission] considers that the Declaration of the Congress of the Union of Constitutional Reform regarding recognition of people of African descent
> to correct the invisibility and exclusion debt that they have faced for over 400 years.
> The addition of Section C to Article 2 of the Constitution Policy of the United Mexican States recognizes people, Afro-Mexican towns and communities as part of the multicultural composition of the nation… For this Human Rights Commission, the constitutional addition is a historic moment for Mexico, because since arriving in this territory, the Afro-descendant population has suffered structural discrimination, through unequal exercise of your human rights, both individually and collectively.]

The imposition and regulation of blackness occurred in the quotidian and official state documents. In 2020, *El Universal*—a prominent Mexican national newspaper,

ran a piece titled *Censo 2020: Cuentan a los Afro por primera vez* (Census 2020: The Afros are counted for the first time). In the section titled "Afromexicano," Rosa María Castro, president of the Association of Women from the Coast of Oaxaca (AMCO) tells the reporter that Mexico's national statistics bureau, INEGI, insisted on the term "Afromexicano" instead of others such as Negro/a/x. She further explained: "Fue duro imponernos con el término afromexicano… Llevamos más de 20 años luchando por que se nos reconozca. No estamos mendigando nada, estamos exigiendo un derecho que ya se nos reconoció en la Constitución" (It was hard to impose ourselves with the Afro-Mexican term. We have been fighting for more than 20 years to be recognized. We are not begging for anything, we are demanding a right that has already been recognized in the Constitution).

This moment illuminates two important things to note: the desire to have the rights allotted by the Mexican state to Black Mexicans, as already in the constitution; and 2), the tension that was articulated by Rosy and other leaders of collectives (oftentimes led by women) concerning the government's insistence on prioritizing *Afro* over the term *negro*, a term used by communities for centuries.

This Word is Foreign: The Term Afro and Blackness

Every November for the last twenty years, México Negro A.C. and a growing number of groups that advocate for rights and recognition of Black and African descendants collaborate with the Mexican government to put on the National Meeting of Afro-Mexican Towns. Filled with three days of panels, talks, and cultural expositions, representatives of Black, moreno, and prieto[14] communities convene for a few days to reconnect, discuss issues that pertain to Black communities, and speak on panels concerning cultural and political matters.

The feel of 2019's *encuentro*[15] was thick with anticipation; it was on the heels of the national 2020 census, the first in Mexico's independent history in which Black people of African descent would be counted and included. But the thickness in the air was not just from anticipation, but also skepticism. Zora*, a Black organizer and teacher in Mexico City, was one of the most vocal of skeptics.

On one of the evenings, in which a panel of Afro-Mexican representatives from across the nation spoke, Zora asked anyone that crossed her path: "Excuse me, is this the panel for Black Mexican representatives? Are they [pointing to the women on stage] Black?"

Some ignored, others shrugged in ambivalence; others replied with "Afro." The explanations for this term, when pressed, were different; however, all of the replies illuminated a growing conflict that many in various iterations of the movement were starting to harbor: that although they had finally achieved one of the central tenets of the Black Mexico movement—recognition by the national government, both in the census and the national constitution—the State had invented and carefully curated its own version of blackness that was made legible to the wider non-Black and non-Indio mestizo hegemonic population.

Representatives at the recent meeting were all lighter skinned; darker skinned participants were not as readily chosen as panelists or performers. This point of contention has been called out by various collectives and people who are racialized as *negro/a/x* or *Prieto/a/x* who often embodied a Black politic that called into question how *Afro* was different from their experiences as Black people in Mexico. 2019 marked the first time that the meeting was in Mexico City; yet, some of the organizing groups and collectives that were based in Mexico City felt shut out and unwelcomed from the annual meeting due to their stances on the Black migrant crisis and critique of the term that permeated every announcement of the meeting: Afro. Members across collectives—some vocally, others not—expressed frustration on how those that live an embodied Black, moreno, or prieto identity were sidelined in the meeting in lieu of what the Mexican state viewed as ideal blackness. In an article with the blog *Afrofemininas*, Scarlett Estrada troubled the identifier of *mestizo*: "Miscegenation is a concept that homogenizes the population, which was sought by 20th century nationalism. Consequently, Mexican black people have been made invisible… Mixed race? Mexican? I wondered frequently. Neither of the two "roots" identifies me."[16] Scarlett and others trouble and defy the assimilationist project of mestizaje by not only using Negro, but also taking up a Black politic that directly challenges the false promises of multiculturalism.[17]

Outside of the meeting, collectives in Mexico City, such as Flores de Jamaica and Panafricanistas, pointed out the hypocrisy of the Mexican government for recognizing blackness and paying lip service to correct the wrongs that 400 years of intentional invisibilization and discrimination had caused Black and Afrodescendants in its nation. At the same time, news stories concerning the horrific conditions that Black migrants from Central America, Haiti, and West Africa suffered under in detention centers on both of Mexico's international land borders. Dispatches from Tapachula, a town in the southern Mexican state of Chiapas, showed the violence that the Guardia Nacional imposed on migrants;[18] some trying to reach the United States for political asylum, others in search of a better life that Mexico could possibly offer.

Solidarity with Black migrants was central to many organizers and their politic as Black and Prietx people. Leona Uhuru, a self-identified prieta and Pan-Africanist artist, noted:

> I learned that being prieta is a condition that not only determines race, a prieta can be Black or indigenous or both. In Mexico, the word "prieto" is used to derogatively describe a condition of class, race and gender marginality, that is to say being prieto is being peripheral with melanin and non-white features. The vindication of the word prieta in Mexico is important to me because everyone knows it and uses it in an internalization of racism to describe other people who do not follow the white aspirational ideals.. this word is the bridge to retake it with pride and as a strategy to discuss mainly racial issues in Mexico, which are very little identified and talked about in Mexican society… But for me, a prieta, Afro-Native woman in Mexico, the

> pan-Africanist movement is a worldview from which we cannot escape, based on the principles and philosophy of the international community and solidarity among our people for the progress and justice of our people, in other words, the pan-Africanist movement is the clear guide to the praxis of unity and alliance with oppressed people to survive white supremacy.

These testimonials from people who identified as or with across the multitudes of black identity signifiers—negro/a, Prieto/a, and in particular instances, moreno/a—demonstrate a racial paradigm that sits outside of the state's conception of what is acceptable for the modern Mexican citizen. For one to "move up", noting here a socioeconomic and literal upward racial mobility, one must discard of what is incompatible with the nation's mestizaje. Some are unable to because of racial assemblages that mark them always as Black and/or Indigenous. Others that could racially shift—albeit to an extent because of the function of blackness and indigeneity—chose not to.

In a 2016 interview with a community leader in Guerrero, one noted how "Here [in this moreno town], one may not identify as negro because it could limit their possibilities of obtaining a job, opportunities, or a life that one respects." This indicated literal consequences that determined the quality of life for one depending on not only how they and the geography in which are racialized—but also how they racialized themselves.

In a recent interview concerning Black census workers and communities,[19] Mariela Zaguilan Daza a poll worker, notes that the community does not answer to the term "Afro-Mexican"; instead, they only use Black, said with pride. When asked the question on the census concerning identification as Afro, Azela Dominga Oliva from La Boquilla, Oaxaca, answers:
"Negra hasta la muerte." *Black until the death.*

Endnotes

1. *Comision de Derechos Humanos Del Distrito Federal*, 2019; emphasis mine.
2. Starting with Peña Nieto's administration, but with inclusion of the Mexican constitution and the 2020 census happened under the Andrés Manuel López Obrador AMLO government.
3. The United States has a long history of imperialism throughout the world, and in particular, Latin America. See Eduardo Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America,* 1971; Greg Gandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin American, The United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism*, 2007. The United States continues this violent legacy with its relationship to Mexico (from its acquisition of land from the 1840s onward, parasitic economic policy such as NAFTA, and the current president's policies towards its shared border with México and the formation of Guardia Nacional). See https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/26/mexico-immigration-amlo-enforcement-trump.
4. For further discussion, see: Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*. Minneapolis: Universiy of Minnesota Press, 2007; Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America," *International Sociology* vol. 15, no. 2 (2000), 215–232; Anibal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality," *Cultural Studies* vol 21, no. 2-3 (2007), 168-178; Tiffany Lethabo King, "New World Grammars: The 'Unthought' Black Discourses of Conquest" *Theory & Event* vol. 19, no. 4 (2016); Maria Elena Martinez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2008; Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*. United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1997.

5. A quick, important note on terms: As we move across spatiotemporal contexts, so also do terminologies that people use to describe themselves and others. Here, I do my best to do the work of translating as closely as possible terms used—sometimes interchangeably, sometimes not—from Spanish to English. It is important to note that usage of these terms in other contexts does not automatically equate to a distancing of blackness. Rather, I join a rising tide of scholars and members across the diaspora that are raising concerns about the shifting meanings of Afro as an inclusionary project. For a rich discussion on the shifting use of racialized terms that pertain to blackness in México, see also: Varela Huerta, Itza Amanda, "Formas de nombrar: espacios de inclusion/exclusion." *Estudiar el racismo: afrodescendientes en México*, (Instituto Nacional de Anthropología e Historia, 2019), 481-520.
6. Herman L Bennett, *Africans in Colonial Mexico: Absolutism, Christianity, and Afro-Creole Consciousness, 1570-1640*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003, 2-15.
7. Herman L. Bennett, *Colonial Blackness: A History of Afro-Mexico*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009, 4.
8. María Elena Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011, 6.
9. Fabiola López-Durán, *Eugenics in the Garden: Transatlantic Architecture and the Crafting of Modernity*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018, 31.
10. Ibid.
11. Juliet Hooker, *Theorizing Race in the Americas: Douglass, Sarmiento, Du Bois, and Vasconcelos*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, 171; José Vasconcelos, *The Cosmic Race/La Raza Cósmica*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1979, 32.
12. See Juliet Hooker, "Indigenous Inclusion/Black Exclusion: Race, Ethnicity, and Multicultural Citizenship in Latin America," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 37 (2): 285-310; Tianna S. Paschel *Becoming Black Political Subjects: Movements and Ethno-Racial Rights in Colombia and Brazil*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016.
13. The Mexican Constitution, Article 2.
14. A note on terms *Negro/a/x/e, Moreno,* and *Prieto*: Negro is Spanish for Black; moreno, often meaning "darker-skinned" in most of Spanish speaking Latin America and Mexico, is used a bit differently in the Costa Chica region of Guerrero and Oaxaca to note one of "mixed" Black/African and Indigenous heritage. Prieto, often used in a derogatory manner that index one's perceived lower class or racial status, has shifted into a racialized term of endearment in Mexico City and elsewhere by those who would be called this as a slur. For some, the use of these terms—or rather, how they are deployed onto particular flesh—depend on temporal, spatial, and geographical contexts.
15. The Spanish term for *meeting*.
16. https://afrofeminas.com/2019/07/03/las-personas-negras-mexicanas-existimos/
17. Many scholars within the fields of Black Studies and Indigenous Studies have pointed out the illusions of multiculturalism. In particular, see Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008; Audra Simpson, *Mohawkus Interruptus: Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2014; Denise Ferreira da Silva, "'Bahia Pêlo Negro': Can the Subaltern (Subject of Raciality) Speak?," *Ethnicities* 5, no. 3 (2005), 321–42.; the work of Charles Hale, and others.
18. This is from the reporting of Brooke Kipling; numerous solidarity campaigns that exposed the horrors of Mexico's southern border that migrants face, including direct reports from the organization *Humanizing Deportation*; as well as personal testimonies, such as http://humanizandoladeportacion.ucdavis.edu/en/2019/10/05/218-the-hard-way-but-the-only-way/).
https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/immigration-panama-colombia-darien/
19. Chaca, Roselia. "'Soy Negra': Afros Abrazan Su Raíz En Censo Del Inegi." *El Universal* , March 15, 2020. https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/estados/soy-negra-afros-abrazan-su-raiz-en-censo-del-inegi.