Review of African Mexicans and the Discourse of the Modern Nation by Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas

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African Mexicans and the Discourse of the Modern Nation
by Marco Polo Hernández Cuevas. Foreword by Richard L. Jackson

Reviewed by Elisa Rizo

In this, his first book, Marco Polo Hernández asserts that African heritage has been silenced in the official national discourse through a whitening rhetoric promoted by the post revolutionary government between 1920 and 1968. Drawing on theoretical insights from Richard Jackson’s “Black Phobia and the White Aesthetic in Spanish American Literature” and James Snead’s “White Screens Black Images: The Dark Side of Hollywood,” Hernández examines specific cultural objects (one essay, two novels, one film, and several collective practices) to illustrate different ways in which Mexico’s African legacy has been denied by the homogenizing official culture.

The conceptual core of the book is enclosed in chapter one: “The Revolution and Invisibility: African Mexicans and the Ideology of Mestizaje in La raza cósmica.” In this piece, Hernández follows Jackson’s theory to recognize the previous existence of racist thought in Mexican laws since colonial times and after independence. He also concentrates on the racial paradigm of “Hispanic mestizo” that Vasconcelos presented in La raza cósmica (1925). Vasconcelos’ doctrine is proposed as a key element in the de-authorization or fixation of non-European/Spanish groups within Mexico’s official national image. Most importantly, this first essay of the book sets the critical view—to be extended into the following chapters—about the inherent discrimination against blacks within the cultural politics promoted by the PRI-gobierno in different spheres of Mexican life.

In chapter two, Hernández locates the African legacy within Mexico’s institutionalized traditions. “The Erased Africaness of Mexican Icons” delves into different expressions of collective behaviors as they have been selected and homogenized into an unproblematic, state-licensed, discourse of Mexican folklore. The author looks at a variety of national emblems: social types (china, chinaco), music (mariachi, son), food (menudo, mondongo), celebrations (fandango), and words (chingar) and traces their African genesis. For example, on the study of the word chingar, Hernández states:

In “El verbo chingar: una palabra clave” (The verb chingar: a key word), Rolando Antonio Pérez Fernández tracks the African legacy of the word. Contrary to all previous affirmations about the roots of the word chingar, including that of Octavio Paz in El laberinto, he finds that chingar is of Kimbundu origin, a language of the Bantu family. According to Pérez Fernández, chingar is a word bequeathed by Angolan slaves (307) whose presence and influence in Mexico as well as in all of the Americas is well established (Aguirre Beltrán 139, 141)

He continues on the same page:

In the Mexican context, this theory becomes plausible in light of the location of colonial obrajes (textile industry slave shops) legally restricted to Puebla, Michoacan, Guanajuato, Queretaro, Tlaxcala, Oaxaca and Mexico; that in the seventeenth century a good number of black slaves labored in that industry (Reynoso 23); and that there was continuous commercial contact with other parts of the Colony where the word chingar, or a derivative, is present.
And continues:

The word *chingar* may be traced from Veracruz to practically all of Mexico and the Americas where the black African presence is an integral part of the making of the nations and identities in addition to being an historical fact. *Chingar* can be found in the company of the *Fandango* or "great parties," where the foul word called poetry by Paz may be heard. (49)

By engaging in the re-visitation such a representative "Mexican" word, Hernández raises a valid question regarding the simplicity of the proclaimed ethnic background of the so-called Mexican race. This approach to the word *chingar* illustrates the method of questioning utilized by Hernández to examine settled "Mestizo/Mexican" emblems, where the recognized constitutive parts refer to Mexican Indians and Spanish only, thus negating a crucial part of the Colonial enterprise in Mexico: the slave trade. Throughout the chapter, Hernández puts forward the presence of African cultures in today's Mexico, calls for further identification of the problematic relationships between the state's cultural policy and collective memory, and also appeals for the recognition of denied tensions of class and ethnicity that have existed—and still exist—within the Mexican population.

The mapping of the African presence in Mexican cultural expressions and its erasure through Vasconcelos' white aesthetics resumes with the analysis of a 1938 Mexican novel in "La vida inútil de Pito Pérez: Tracking the African Contribution to the Mexican Picaresque Sense of Humor." In this third chapter, Hernández employs the ethnographic and historical accounts of Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, Manuel Payno, and Alvaro Ochoa Serrano to complement his analytical framework in the analysis of the portrayal of African Mexicans. Hernández relates the represented population in the novel to the culture of the *inter-casitas* or *mezclas* described by the above mentioned intellectuals. Payno's descriptions of the *léperos*, together with Aguirre's and Ochoa's historical observations about the Black culture in the state of Michoacán support Hernández's proposal. The main character, Pito Pérez, is highlighted as an inheritor of the *mezclas* culture. Hernández proposes:

Throughout the narrative, there are other keys and "psycho-alcoholic" digressions (221) that, although blurred and diluted, point toward the African dimension of the area where the anecdotes that divide this work take place. (64)

However, the author does not go into deep textual analysis of the African component depicted in this narrative. For example, Hernández establishes:

Among the keys that point out the African element in the area's *mezclas* are the inference that Pito does not belong to the "privileged castas" (15); and that Pito is a *lépero* prototype, identified as a knave (21); who mocks modernity (280), who laughs at humanist precepts (183), who satirizes the clergy (210), and the privileged *castas* (58) and scorns the government (59, 82, 85), thus echoing his daring African ancestors who would gather in plazas to drink spirits, sing profanities and dance lasciviously openly challenging the Catholic Church and the State. (64)

The selected list of descriptions of Pito
Pérez—taking in to consideration the ethnographic references provided earlier in this essay—are offered as obvious proof of the survival of the mezcla’s cultures in this area of Mexico. However, for those interested in this topic, further dissertation on the correlation of ethnographic accounts, official discourse and fiction would have been desirable. That does not mean that the essay is not a good evaluation of the issue. Hernández effectively unveils the inherent racist discourse in the text, and identifies ethnic tensions within the represented historical context of the novel in other instances where secondary characters are identified with direct derogatory connotations. All together, Hernández’s argument that Vasconcelos’ eugenic ideology permeates over the fictionalization of Mexican Black characters in this novel through the presentation of stereotypical characters that obey “the criollo world view” (66) is maintained. This study of La vida inútil de Pito Pérez presents an important contribution to Mexican cultural studies because it positions debate of African Mexican culture at the center.

Chapter four, “Angelitos Negros, a Film from the ‘Golden Age’ of Mexican Cinema: Coding Visibly Black Mestizos By and Through a Far Reaching Medium,” observes open racism perpetrated against African Mexicans through condescending portrayals. An asset of this inquest of Mexican pop-culture is Hernández’s proposal of the potential influence that the U.S. movie “Imitation of Life” may have had on the depiction of a whitened/modernized/Americanized society in this 1948 Mexican film, thus, pointing out the (not always recognized) influence of U.S. ethnic discourse on its Mexican counterpart. Moreover, Angelitos negros is identified within a group of Mexican movies that target the African theme, thus posing the problematic nature of the “Mestizo = Indian + Spanish” equation to the public. The central part of the essay can be identified in the following statements:

The “rediscovery” of visibly black Mexicans or mestizos in the mid forties, dealt a heavy blow to the myth of a purely Amerindian and “Spanish” mestizaje. It brought to the forefront the question of diversity in Mexico. (75)

However:

Angelitos negros reinforces the power relationships instituted since colonial times between visibly black people and lighter skinned people by positioning the darker people as subservient. (75)

As these quotes show, Hernández recognizes the lost opportunity for revindication of African Mexicans and denounces the perpetuation of colonial dynamics of power through “modern media.” Likewise, Hernández pays attention to problematic features of this Mexican movie, such as the appearance of light-skinned actors with painted faces to play the roles of blacks, and the recognition of a plot that promotes discrimination as an acceptable practice. This re-visitation of a widely dispersed depiction of Mexican Blacks presents a useful assessment of the ways in which Mexico’s multicultural reality is processed and presented. Hernández’s proposal is to acknowledge once and for all, the racist thought engrained in official Mexican culture and to extend an invitation toward its revision.

Hernández ends his critique of the effects
of Mexican post revolutionary whitening discourse with a fifth chapter: "Modern National Discourse and La muerte de Artemio Cruz: the Illusory Death of African Mexican Lineage." His reading of Fuentes's narrative studies the political, ethnic and historical nuances used in the development of the central character of the novel, Artemio Cruz. Cruz is identified by Hernández as a Mexican of African descent, more specifically, as a whitened black. The author traces Cruz's Afro-Mexican origins and characteristics, pointing to the symbolic detriment imposed on African Mexicans through the depiction of Cruz as a traitor of the Revolution, and thus, as a corrupt and undesirable Mexican citizen. In spite of the significance of this appreciation of La muerte de Artemio Cruz, the exclusion of explicit textual evidence within the argumentation of the essay hinders a more profound analysis of the negative imagery utilized by Fuentes to depict African Mexicans and, by extension, hampers his attempt to establish a solid conceptual link between this novel and Vasconcelos' Raza cósmica ideology. Nevertheless, Hernández's clever underlining of certain passages in the novel reveals a new viewpoint on the cultural materials employed by such a celebrated writer as Fuentes in this negative—problematic, to say the least—depiction of Mexicans of African descent.

In African Mexicans and the Discourse of the Modern Nation, Hernández demonstrates a sharp eye for identifying symbolic fissures within the official discourse of "Mexicannes" and the actual history and culture of Mexico. He responds to the gap in Mexican cultural studies by offering an analysis of a broad range of instances—across many media