Afro-Mexican History: Trends and Directions in Scholarship*

Ben Vinson III
Penn State University

Abstract

This article surveys the development of a relatively new and vibrant subfield in Latin American History, mapping out the major stages of its evolution and signaling key intellectual debates. While much of the scholarship on Afro-Mexican history has been produced in the last thirty-five years, this article aims to contextualize these writings within a broader historical framework. This process shows more clearly the various independent and interdependent tracks that exist within the study of Mexico’s black population.

Until very recently, the study of Mexico’s black population could not be categorized as forming any particular school of thought or intellectual inquiry. The impressionistic nature of the writings on blacks, which persisted even well into the 20th century, frequently worked to subordinate Afro-Mexican history to broader themes, such as nationalism, the economy, regional development, and general social conditions. Nevertheless, it is still possible to outline the evolution of historical scholarship on blacks in Mexico, extending back into the colonial period. What we discover is that in many ways, the discussion of blacks has followed the trajectory of the political development of the nation. Writings on Afro-Mexicans can be grouped into periods that correspond to (1) Mexico’s colonial and independence era (1521–1821); (2) the pre-revolutionary period (1822–1910); and (3) the post-revolutionary period (1921 to current). Within these periods there is much nuance to account for, but by and large, they provide useful markers by which to evaluate the progression of the intellectual conversation on Mexico’s blackness.

In the colonial period, outside of the abundant ecclesiastical and government documentation that can still be found in the colonial archives, very few published works concentrated directly upon blacks. What survives comes mainly in three forms: traveler’s accounts, narrative accounts of the Conquest of Mexico, and political treatises. In terms of travelogues, the narratives of men such as Thomas Gage, Juan F. Gemelli Carreri, Fray Francisco de Ajofrín, and Alexander von Humbolt are revealing for the patterns of discourse that they uncover.1 By and large, their writings depict

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mulattos, pardos, and negros in a negative light, to the extent that they cite these populations as bearing a corrupting influence on the social development of the colonies. Meanwhile, the accounts of the Conquest, frequently referred to as the “chronicles,” represent a different, although related genre. More historically grounded, the writings of men such as Francisco López de Gomara (c. 1552), Bernal Díaz del Castillo (c. 1562), and Fray Diego Durán (c. 1580) make reference to the black military auxiliaries who accompanied the Spanish conquistadors. As can be imagined, blacks appear as ornaments to the main story, or as scapegoats and anti-heroes that complemented the dominant Spanish presence. Finally, in colonial political treatises, blacks make equally brief appearances in works discussing social conditions, military organization, and municipal control. Perhaps more than in the other types of texts however, the Afro-Mexican population appears less of a novelty, being discussed as an embedded element of colonial life. It is here where we find blacks becoming more tightly associated with the colony’s amorphous “plebeian” class.

During the pre-revolutionary period (1822–1910), a reassessment was made regarding the worth of blacks to the emerging national narrative. How would the young nation create a coherent citizenry out of the various populations inhabiting Mexico’s disparate regions? The answer would elude the country for most of the 19th century as Mexico plunged deep into civil unrest. Out of it all, however, race and ethnicity emerged as important points of debate, as the nation experimented with social philosophies such as positivism to help chart a course for successful nationhood. Consequently, blacks began appearing in historical writings in more central ways. Some intellectuals discovered a certain freedom in being able to appropriate the black image in ways that furthered their political agendas. The writings of Vicente Riva Palacio provide a good example. One of the central figures behind the popularization of a literary genre known as the “historical novel,” Riva Palacio’s archival research brought to life the struggles of black runaway slaves, as well as free-blacks who pushed for rights in colonial society. Through stories such as those found in El libro rojo and Los treinta y tres negros, the plight of these blacks served as a didactic tool, helping the Mexican readership of the mid-19th century confront issues of their own oppression at the hands of foreign powers (France and the United States). These stories also helped Mexicans better understand the intricacies of homegrown class inequity. Embedded distantly in the secure comfort of the early colonial period, the experience of blacks, as recounted by Riva Palacio, offered poignant social commentary in ways that felt safe to a divided nation. Moreover, because blacks were viewed ambivalently, both as a part and not a part of the nation, their experiences possessed an added voyeuristic effect.

The pre-revolutionary era also produced a very different type of writing. On the pages of Mexico’s newspapers and journals, articles inspired by pseudo-scientific and social Darwinist theories debated the worth of blacks to the nation. For some, the supposedly detrimental physical qualities of
blacks were construed as unhealthy for progress, but for others blacks were heralded as the possible answer to some of Mexico’s economic woes. Especially in backwater regions where the climate was deemed too inhospitable for attracting coveted white immigrants, foreign blacks were encouraged to settle as colonists. Some believed that through their labor they might be able to perform the same economic miracles that they did for the U.S. South, or for Cuba’s sugar plantations. As intellectuals argued over black “worth,” they substantiated some of their claims with history.

Debates about the worth of blacks took a slightly different course in the context of the Mexican Revolution. Indeed, the cultural landscape produced by this seminal event had a lasting effect on Afro-Mexican historiography. After the revolution, Mexico placed a heightened emphasis on the hybrid nature of its population to demonstrate the strength of its national character. But a certain type of hybrid phenotype was praised – the mestizo, or mixture of white and Indian. Blacks were literally written out of the national narrative. Excluding blacks from the national image was a process that was long in the making, but arguably, it was in the 1920s when the process had some of its strongest influences.

Regardless, a number of key historical works appeared that continued to valorize, or at least mention blacks. Alfonso Toro was among those who postulated that in order to better understand the temperament of the Mexican citizenry, one needed a better grasp of the long-term contributions of Afro-Mexicans. Citing the writings of colonial missionaries, as well as episodes of slave rebellion and resistance, Toro recounted that the black population had been extremely bellicose in New Spain. As blacks became assimilated into the general population, he believed that they slowly transmitted their belligerent behavioral qualities into the character of the broader citizen body. As a result, the Mexican people’s propensity for revolt, which had been witnessed during the Mexican Revolution, the struggle for independence, and the tumultuous 19th century, could be partly credited to the nation’s Afro-Mexican heritage.

While a string of books and articles were written in the 1920s and 30s on Afro-Mexicans, it was in the 1940s when the so-called birth of Afro-Mexican historical studies began. The credit is usually given to the work of, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, whose La población negra de México (1946) has become the cornerstone of the field. Having been trained by Melville Herskovits at Northwestern, Aguirre Beltrán’s book was the first to systematically employ a methodology for examining the African roots of Mexico’s population. His book also offered a sweeping demographic analysis of the colonial black population, stressing the extent to which blacks could be found throughout New Spain. One of the book’s main arguments took cue from the Mexican Revolution. As revisionist as it was in giving space to Afro-Mexicans in the nation’s history, La población negra emphasized assimilation and hybridity, noting that the colonial Mexican caste system and its abolition during the Independence era created superb circumstances for racial mixture. Apart
from a few isolated regional pockets, Aguirre Beltrán wrote that Afro-Mexicans had eagerly and spontaneously blended into the broader national population by the early years of Independence.

It is important to stress that Aguirre Beltrán’s work, while pioneering, was not written in isolation. German Latorre (1920) had already started the demographic work that proved foundational to the writings of Aguirre Beltrán. Carlos Basauri’s (1943) ethnographic study of Mexico’s black populations proved influential to Aguirre Beltrán’s later writings. Lastly, Aguirre Beltrán’s decision to study Afro-Mexicans was not an idea he conceived of himself. Rather, he appears to have been prodded into the project upon the suggestion of Manuel Gamio, one of the leading intellectual figures of Mexico’s Revolutionary period.

The era of scholarship on Afro-Mexicans that stretched through the 1940s, 50s, and early 60s can be categorized as one of gradual internationalization, as more scholars from outside of Mexico began paying closer attention the Mexican case. Aguirre Beltrán’s study came at a particularly opportune time in this regard. It was published during the same year as Frank Tannenbaum’s *Slave and Citizen* (1946), which opened a series of debates that launched the comparative slavery school. Through an increasingly internationalized understanding of slave systems, scholars began trying to uncover the roots of the “Negro problem” that had so beleaguered the United States, but which seemed largely resolved in Latin American societies. Tannenbaum’s thesis that Latin American slavery was qualitatively different than in North America and the British colonies sent scores of scholars scurrying to prove (or disprove) his points. Aguirre Beltrán’s book, although engaged in conversation with a different historiography, emerged in the context of the Tannenbaum debate as an important tome on Mexican slavery and Latin American race relations, offering some support to the idealized, benign portrait of Latin American slave systems. The book was positioned alongside other important classics that were written by nationalistically oriented scholars who sought to affirm Latin American race mixture, such as Gilberto Freyre in Brazil, and to a lesser extent Fernando Ortiz in Cuba. The ramifications of these early investigations into the condition of race within individual Latin American countries have been wide reaching, particularly in the past few decades, as the African Diaspora research paradigm has been affecting worldwide scholarship on the black presence. While falling outside the scope of this article, it is important to note that alongside the slow creation of the Afro-Mexican historical subfield, parallel developments took place in areas such as Nicaragua, Colombia, Ecuador, Panama, Venezuela, Peru, Costa Rica, and Guatemala, among others. Although each of these historiographies on Afro-Latin Americans enjoys an independent track, they are interdependently related, and scholars working in one area feed off the research advances of each other. International conferences and events, such as annual workshops held by the Association for the Study of the Worldwide African Diaspora (ASWAD), UNESCO’s Tracking the Salve Route Project,
and Harvard’s Atlantic History Seminar have provided active forums for maintaining fertile scholarly dialogue. The next step which this emerging, nationally bounded literature may take is to embark upon grand synthesis, as signaled earlier in a seminal article written by the late Frederick Bowser in 1972.¹⁴

Returning to Mexico, the late 1950s and early 60s witnessed another important development in Latin American historiography that impacted Mexico. Inquiries into the hierarchical structure of colonial society generated great interest in the Mexican caste system. A new generation of scholars began to wonder if the impact of class differences in the colonial period outweighed the power of race/caste and estate structures in the articulation of social relations. The questions generated the caste vs. class debate, whose rich historiography has contributed greatly to our understanding of black colonial life.¹⁵ Meanwhile, the 1950s and 60s were witness to key international movements, specifically the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. and the de-colonization efforts in Africa, which elevated the profile of scholarship on blacks. In the scholarly realm, Phillip Curtin’s *The Slave Trade, A Census* (1969), re-invigorated the field of comparative slavery by offering a panoramic overview of slave demography.¹⁶ To test his numbers, scholars began the hard work of advancing case studies, of which Mexico became a part.

Among the better known works that came as a result of the early internationalization of Afro-Mexican history are the books and articles written by Patrick Carroll, Colin Palmer, Peter Boyd-Bowman, Edgar Love, David Davidson, Robert Brady, and William H. Dusenberry.¹⁷ While their works largely investigated the intricacies of Mexican slavery, their research questions were in dialogue with some of the issues of the comparative slavery school. A number of Mexican based scholars were drawn into this arena of research as well, but by and large, the strong tradition of regional history, which continues to be a prevalent feature of the Mexican academy today, generated a score of studies from the 1970s–1990s, which sought to examine the local contributions of blacks to regional society.¹⁸

The internationalization of scholarship on Afro-Mexico after the 1950s essentially helped establish a three-track system of research. On one track, a significant concentration of Mexican scholars have pursued the research path initially set forth by Aguirre Beltrán in seeking to understand how blackness fits into the larger, post-revolutionary national discourse of *mestizaje* (racial mixture). These studies have become quite sophisticated in their analysis over the years, postulating new visions of hybridity that push and test *mestizaje*. In making use of the literature on transculturation and syncretism, and by carefully periodizing the influences of black populations from the colonial period into modern times, this work is showing the spaces for the survival and transformation of African cultures. On another track, a significant number of international scholars (and some Mexicans) have examined the Mexican case to better understand processes of slavery,
freedom, and blackness, but within a broader global context. Lastly, the third track has seen both Mexican and international scholars working towards understanding the intricacies of Mexican colonial and nation-state hierarchies, and determining how blackness fits within such social organization schemes.

The past decade has witnessed a flurry of new research on all three tracks. More has transpired, however, than a steady increase in the volume of works. Some important shifts in conceptual approaches have taken place as well. Among the most notable have been the cultural and linguistic turns in historical analysis, prodding scholars to make deeper and richer use of records, such as Inquisition cases. As the foray into discourse analysis has ensued, new appreciations have emerged for the symbolic workings of power. Moreover, the themes of individual and collective agency, which have always been apparent in works on slave resistance, have reached new levels of sophistication. Scholars are paying closer attention to more everyday forms of agency, located not just in the struggle between masters and slaves, but between freedmen and bureaucrats, slaves and ecclesiastical authorities, men and women, and between the races themselves. Arguably, until recently, the topic of agency has not been as deeply embraced by scholars in Mexico as from elsewhere, since one of the critical implications of black agency is that black identities could have been fostered and nurtured at the expense of colonial and nationalist state-building enterprises. This perspective runs countercurrent to those who hold fast to the assimilationist narrative of Afro-Mexican history. Similarly, while both Mexican and international scholars have studied the intricacies of caste hierarchy, the caste vs. class debate has been seemingly less influential in the writings of scholars from Mexico. For many of them, the caste vs. class debate has a clearer resolution—class emerged as a more critical force towards shaping social relations than caste. Such a perspective supports the assimilationist narrative. Nevertheless, within Mexico, these research trends are beginning to change amongst those who specialize on Afro-Mexican topics. Furthermore, recent public debates on race held in Mexico during the spring and summer of 2005, surrounding the international controversies raised by the comments of President Vicente Fox, as well as Mexico’s decision to release a stamp in the image of the comic book character Memín Pinguin, have shown new Mexican sensitivities to the topic of black identity. Within Mexico, there have even been movements by a limited number of Afro-Mexicans and politicians to press for the formal recognition of blacks as an ethnic group, so as to facilitate their acquisition of important communal rights. In this sense, a small segment of the Afro-Mexican community is engaging in the project of multi-cultural politics that has been sweeping Latin America since the 1980s. Meanwhile, in the academic realm, a number of Mexican scholars are mapping out research trajectories that include subaltern approaches, and the history of “mentalities,” along the lines of the French school of historical analysis. Additionally, Mexican scholars, who have always been seemingly more committed to fusing anthropological and sociological techniques into
their historical research than U.S. scholars, are developing and expanding the interdisciplinary nature of their work. In short, a range of new methodologies and questions mark a qualitative shift from previous demographically influenced and economic approaches to social history. Of course, despite the changes, there still remain those in Mexico who cling strongly to the idea that care must be exercised when reifying blacks within scholarly and public discourse, since invoking “race” is analogous to inculcating racism. But their opinions are being heavily challenged from within, as well as from without.

Current historical work on the Afro-Mexican experience appears to be headed in several directions. First, while slavery remains an important lens to study the black experience, increasingly, scholars are becoming interested in the lives of free-black populations. Some have taken an institutional approach, examining free-black participation in military and religious institutions. Others are exploring the conceptual meaning of freedom, both for slaves and freedmen. A few have made inquiries into black political participation in the 19th century. However, black life in the 19th and 20th centuries remains an understudied topic in need of more research. On the other hand, religion and magic are themes of great importance to current and emerging studies, since these arenas offered power to Afro-Mexicans, especially in the colonial period. Historians are also beginning to triangulate studies of blacks with greater precision, studying the interrelationships between Indians, Afro-Mexicans, and Spaniards. Studies of caste relationships remain important, although some of the newer inquiries are starting to examine the origins of the system and its relationship to Spanish concepts of blood purity (limpieza de sangre) and citizenry (vecindad). Work on regional history continues to increase both in sophistication, coverage, and thematic complexity. As the field continues to mature, what seems inevitable is greater convergence between internationally based scholars and those writing in Mexico. This convergence may begin to incorporate greater numbers of African scholars. Also, the African Diaspora and Black Atlantic research paradigms which have begun to take hold in the United States, will serve to help fashion some of the newer questions to be asked of the current generation of international scholars. Already some of those questions are appearing – what has been the process of Afro-Mexican ethnogenesis (as opposed to asking how Afro-Mexicans have facilitated Mexican mestizaje), how does the Mexican case improve our understanding of other Latin American colonies where the black population was far smaller than the indigenous population, and what are the mechanisms (cultural, social, political) that link Afro-Mexicans to the broader Atlantic world?

Notes
Ben Vinson III is Associate Professor of Latin American History at Penn State University. He is the author of Bearing Arms for His Majesty: The Free-Colored Militia in Colonial Mexico (Stanford,
Stanford University Press, 2001); Flight: The Story of Virgil Richardson, A Tuskegee Airman in Mexico (New York, Palgrave-Macmillan, 2004); and the co-author of Afróméxico (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2004). His current research is on the Mexican caste system in the 17th and 18th centuries.

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1 F de Ajofrín, Diario del viaje que hizo a la América en el siglo XVIII el padre fray Francisco de Ajofrín (Mexico City, Instituto Cultural Hispano Mexicano, 1965); J. F Gemelli Carreri, Viaje a la Nueva España, México a fines del siglo XVII (Mexico City, Ediciones Libro-Mex, 1995); T. Gage, Nuevo reconocimiento de las Indias Occidentales (Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1982); A. von Humboldt, Ensayo Político sobre el reino de la Nueva España, trans. V. González Arnao, 4 vols. (Paris, 1822).

2 The term pardo technically refers to the mixture of blacks and Indians, but by the 18th century, pardo was used as a synonym for “mulatto” in many circles.


4 Some examples include F Seijas y Lobera, Gobierno militar y político del reino imperial de la Nueva España, ed. P. E. Pérez-Mallaína Bueno (Mexico City, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1986); C. Sigüenza and Gongora, Alboroto y motín de México del 8 de junio de 1692 (Mexico City, Talleres Gráficos del Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Historia y Etnografía, 1932). For more on the “plebeian” nature of Afro–Mexicans, see R. D. Cope, The Limits of Racial Domination: Plebeian Society in Colonial Mexico City, 1660–1720 (Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1994).

5 V. Riva Palacio, M. Payno, J. A. Mateos and R. M. de la Torre, El libro rojo (Mexico City, Editorial Leyenda, 1946); V. Riva Palacio, Los treinta y tres negros (Mexico City, SEP-Conasupo, 1981). Note that good discussion on Palacio can be found in T. G. Vincent, The Legacy of Vicente Guerrero: Mexico’s First Black Indian President (Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 2001).


7 J. Vasconcelos, La Raza Cósmica: Misión de la Raza Iberoamericana (Barcelona, Agencia Mundial de Librería, 1958).


18 Some examples include: F. Fernández Repetto and G. N. Sierra, Una población perdida en la memoria: Los negros de Yucatán (Merida, Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, 1995); J. Andrade Torres, El comienzo de esclavos en la provincia de Tabasco (siglos XVI–XIX) (Villahermosa, Universidad Juarez Autónoma de Tabasco, 1994); M. G. Chávez Carbajal, Propietarios y esclavos negros en Michoacán (1600–1650) (Morelia, Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, 1994); R. Valdez Aguilar, Sinaola: Negritud y Oblivio (Culiacán, Talleres Gráficos El Diario de Sinaloa, 1993); M. L. Gálvez Jiménez, Celaya: Sus ríces africanas (Guanajuato, Ediciones la Rana, 1995). See also several regional articles in L. M. Martínez Montiel and J. C. Reyes (eds), Memoria del III Encuentro Nacional de Afror mexicanistas (Colima, Gobierno del Estado de Colima y Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1993); A. Naveda Chávez-Hita (ed.), Pardos, mulatos y libertos, Sexto encuentro de afror mexicanistas (Xalapa, Universidad Veracruzana, 2001); L. M. Martínez Montiel (ed.), Presencia africana en México (Mexico City, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1994).

19 President Fox was widely criticized when he made a public statement to the effect that Mexican immigrants to the United States take jobs “that not even blacks want to do.” See: “Mexican leader criticized for comment on Blacks,” CNN.com, May 15, 2005, http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/05/14/fox.jackson/.

20 Memín Penguin, a traditional Mexican comic book character originally produced in the 1940s, has been compared in international circles to offensive stereotyped caricatures such as “little black sambo,” among others. In Mexico, the comic book character represents a positive national icon for many. Although much has been written on this in newspapers and on the Internet, see B. Vinson III, “How Memin sparks race-relation talks between U.S., Mexico,” Centre Daily Times (State College), July 25, 2005, p. A6.

21 L. Castellanos, “Buscan volver etnia a los afromexicanos,” Reforma (Mexico City), June 8, 2005, p. 3C.


23 See the historiographical essays in the edited volume compiled by M. E. Velázquez and E. Correa, Poblaciones y culturas de origen africano en México (Mexico City, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2005), especially the essays in pp. 65–141.

24 This idea, found in many parts of Central America, is surveyed well by Q. Duncan, “Existen las razas?” in Poblaciones y culturas de origen africano en México, ed. Velázquez and, pp. 217–25.


27 Vincent, Legacy of Vicente Guerrero.


29 Lewis, Hall of Mirrors; M. Restall, The Black Middle (forthcoming manuscript with Stanford University Press).

30 M. E. Martinez is currently working on these issues. See her dissertation, “The Spanish concept of Limpieza de Sangre and the emergence of the ‘race/caste’ system in the viceroyalty of New Spain,” PhD dissertation (University of Chicago, 2002).

31 Africanist P. T. Zeleza has recently called for greater integration and plans to include Afro-Mexico (and other Latin American cases) in his forthcoming work on the African Diaspora. For his preliminary ideas on the topic, see “Rewriting the African Diaspora: Beyond the black Atlantic,” African Affairs, 104 (414), 2005, pp. 35 – 68. In Mexico, M. E. Velázquez has been calling for greater conversation between Afro-Mexicanists and Africanists. One important work that appears to bridge the divide is N. Ngou-Mve, El África bantú en la colonización de México (1595–1640) (Madrid, Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas-Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional, 1994).

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